



COMBAT

Sudan 1884–98

British Infantryman **VERSUS** Mahdist Warrior

Ian Knight



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Illustrated by Raffaele Ruggeri

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Introduction

On 5 November 1883, in an expanse of desert scrubland in the Sudan known as Shaikan, a force including 7,300 Egyptian infantry, 800 irregular infantry, nearly 1,000 cavalry and 20 guns and machine guns of various types was annihilated by a tribal force of Arabs led not by a great warlord but by a religious prophet. The Arab forces had numbered perhaps 40,000 men – many times more than their opponents – but in truth the outcome was not due to numbers alone; the Egyptians’ superior firepower should have given them a tactical edge, but the expedition was mismanaged from the start. Many of the Egyptians were reluctant conscripts with little or no training, and their morale had been further sapped by three weeks of marching across the desert, trailing from one dry watering-spot to another. Along the way they found leaflets extolling the miracles performed by their enemy, and infiltrators had unsettled them still further with campfire tales of his divine authority. Then, on 3 November, the Arab forces had begun to close in, surrounding the Egyptians, killing stragglers and harassing the main body with long-range rifle fire. The Egyptian column tried to hold its ground but two days later, as it attempted to resume its advance through the scrub in three mutually supporting squares, it was subject to a sudden and fierce attack – and duly collapsed. Here and there some units tried to fight, but most simply panicked, threw down their weapons and tried to run, and each square dissolved amid an unequal struggle at close quarters. The Egyptian troops’ European commanders were cut down and in less than an hour the battle was over; some estimates place the number of Egyptian survivors as low as 300 men, most of whom were captured when wounded, and some of whom were later killed.

OPPOSITE

Lieutenant-General William Hicks – ‘Hicks Pasha’ – was killed at the battle of Shaikan on 5 November 1883, the most spectacular of the Mahdi’s early victories over Egyptian troops. Although the picture correctly suggests that the area of the last stand was in wooded country, it errs in showing the *ansar* wearing the more regularized *jibbehs* of the 1890s. (Author’s collection)

The commander of the expedition, who had died with his men, was Lieutenant-General William Hicks, a retired officer in the British Indian Army, then under commission to the Egyptian Government, and his victorious opponent was Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah, a holy man



from Dongola, on the Nile River, whose visions had led him to declare himself *al-Mahdi* – the ‘divinely guided one’ – a prophet whom Shia Islamic texts foretold would take up the mantle of the Prophet Muhammad and redeem the world. The battle of Shaikan was not the first spectacular victory to fall to the Mahdi, adding greatly to his prestige and furthering his reputation for divine support, but it was the first to involve Egyptian troops overtly backed by Britain, and as such it paved the way for one of the defining struggles of the heyday of the British Empire, a series of

campaigns fought across 15 years and distinguished by their high Imperial context and by their setting – some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world.

At the beginning of the 1880s the British Empire was settling into its role as the greatest international power of the age and adopting forward policies in pursuit of its interests around the world with greater confidence. It had embarked recently upon a series of campaigns in southern Africa and Afghanistan and, while neither had been without setbacks, Britain had secured its dominance in those regions, certainly against local rivals. In 1882, it had intervened in Egyptian affairs – and found itself drawn inexorably into conflict with nationalist movements in Egypt and its southern province, the Sudan.

Egypt had been nominally part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire since the 1820s. In the 1860s the Khedive of Egypt had allowed a French engineering company to build the Suez Canal, which offered a shortcut between the Mediterranean and Red seas, effectively bypassing the need for the older, much longer maritime highway from Europe to the East by way of southern Africa. Initial financial difficulties allowed the British Government the opportunity to buy a significant stake in the canal to protect the most direct route to Imperial possessions in India. By 1880, however, the ruler of Egypt, the Khedive Tewfik Pasha (r. 1879–92), was under pressure from Egyptian-born Army officers who were discontented with the corruption of Ottoman rule. Britain, worried for the security of the canal, had intervened in support of the Khedive, and in September 1882 had landed troops and crushed a *coup d'état* staged by the military. In the aftermath, although the British Government was reluctant to assume direct control over Egypt, the Khedival administration agreed to allow Britain to manage its military affairs.

With Egypt Britain had inherited that country's strained relationship with the Sudan. Egyptian rule there – characterized as 'Turkish' by the Sudanese – was inefficient, harsh, corrupt and unpopular. Even before 1882 a nationalist religious movement was emerging in the Kordofan deserts of the western Sudan to challenge Egyptian dominance. Its instigator was Muhammad Ahmad, who was born in Dongola around 1844 and grew up on the Nile south of the capital of the Egyptian administration, Khartoum. Muhammad Ahmad was an aesthete and a scholar of Islamic texts who experienced a series of visions in which the Prophet directed him to pray in the great mosques of the region, in Cairo, Jerusalem, Constantinople and Mecca. He took these visions as a sign that he was destined to overthrow the corrupt Turkish administration and to be the saviour of Islam, and in May 1881 had proclaimed himself *al-Mahdi*. His message combined a degree of religious fundamentalism and nationalism with an emphasis on the virtues of poverty and it struck a chord with ordinary Sudanese. The Egyptian governor at Khartoum attempted to arrest Muhammad Ahmad but his troops were easily defeated, and word of his early successes only enhanced the Mahdi's reputation.

By June 1881 the situation was rapidly sliding out of Egypt's control; the Mahdi commanded the support of over 10,000 followers and had easily defeated an Egyptian force of more than 5,000 troops. The rebellion had



spread to the hills surrounding the Red Sea port of Suakin, where a *shaikh* of the Bija people, a former slave-trader named 'Uthman abu Bakr Diqna, had rallied them to the Mahdi's cause. On 17 January 1883 the Egyptian capital of the western Sudan, El Obeid, fell to the Mahdi. The victory was not only a huge boost to the Mahdi's prestige but a great boon in military *matériel* since the Mahdists captured over 6,000 Egyptian rifles and five field guns, and pressed 3,500 captured Egyptian troops into service.

The Mahdi's successes prompted the Khedive to ask for British assistance; the British Government refused direct support, so instead the Khedive hired a number of British military advisors and attempted to re-assert Egyptian authority. Hicks was the most important of the British military advisors, but his attempt to re-conquer the Kordofan came spectacularly to an end at Shaikan. Around Suakin Lieutenant-General Valentine Baker's operations also culminated in defeat by 'Uthman Diqna at El Teb on 4 February 1884.

In London the Liberal administration of Prime Minister William Gladstone was determined not to be drawn into direct intervention in the Sudan, instead pressuring the Khedive to cut his losses and abandon the province to the Mahdi – but Gladstone did sanction the despatch of a small force of British regulars to ensure Suakin remained open. There remained the question of what to do with the large number of Egyptian officials and sympathizers in Khartoum whose withdrawal to Egypt was problematic. Here Gladstone agreed to send just one British officer, Major-General Charles Gordon, and his staff with orders to evacuate Khartoum. Gordon was already a popular hero in Britain following his role in Chinese wars of the 1860s, and he knew the Sudan well, having served the Khedive as governor ten years before, where he had been actively involved in the slave trade. Gordon was a complex man, however – a committed humanitarian, a Christian and a man

ABOVE LEFT

Muhammad Ahmad ibn al-Saiyid 'Abd Allah – the Mahdi – was the religious leader who unified the disparate tribes of the Sudan into a nationalist movement directed against the Turco-Egyptian domination of the region. (Author's collection)

ABOVE RIGHT

By the time Major-General Charles Gordon was sent to the Sudan he already enjoyed a public reputation based on his service on behalf of the Chinese Tongzhi Emperor (r. 1861–75) in the 1860s and the Egyptians as governor of Khartoum in the 1870s. Once he arrived in Khartoum in February 1884, however, Gordon proved reluctant to pursue London's exit strategy, and difficult to control. (Universal History Archive/Getty Images)

1 17 January 1883: El Obeid, the capital of the Egyptian-ruled province of Kordofan, falls to the forces of Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdī. That August a follower of the Mahdī, 'Uthman Digna, raises the standard of rebellion among the desert-dwelling Bija people along the Red Sea littoral surrounding the strategically important port of Suakin.

2 5 November 1883: Some 9,000 poorly trained troops under Lieutenant-General William Hicks are surrounded and overrun at the battle of Shaikan.

3 4 February 1884: After some skirmishing round the town of Sinkat and the village of El Teb, a force of Egyptian troops under Lieutenant-General Valentine Baker is heavily defeated near El Teb. In response a force of British regular troops under Major-General Sir Gerald Graham is despatched to Suakin and defeats 'Uthman Digna at the second battle of El Teb on 29 February 1884. A further action takes place at Tamai on 13 March 1884.

4 18 February 1884: Major-General Charles Gordon arrives in Khartoum, tasked with supervising its evacuation. Gordon refuses to evacuate the city, however, instead preparing it for defence.

5 December 1884: Gordon's continued defence of Khartoum puts pressure on the British Government to relieve him. After prolonged discussion it is agreed to despatch a specially equipped force of British regulars under the command of General Wolseley down the Nile River to Korti, where the expedition would divide. One part would continue by river transport along the great bend in the Nile, towards Khartoum; the other would attempt a shortcut across the Bayuda Desert, aiming to strike the Nile at Metemmeh.

6 17 January 1885: The Desert Column is attacked near the wells of Abu Klea; the Mahdists penetrate the British square but are driven off.

7 19 January 1885: The Mahdist force at Metemmeh is dispersed at Abu Kru.

8 10 February 1885: The River Column disperses a Mahdist force at Kirbikan. Both victories are too late to save Khartoum, however, which had fallen on 26 January.

Once the news becomes known the Gordon Relief Expedition retires to Egypt.

9 March 1885: With the fall of Khartoum the British decide to secure Suakin and the by-now Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald Graham's forces are reinforced with the intention of suppressing 'Uthman Digna. On 20 March Mahdist forces are dispersed at Hashin, and on 22 March an expedition against 'Uthman Digna's encampments wins a costly but decisive victory at Tofrek, dispersing the Bija.

10 30 December 1885: The Mahdi himself having died in June 1885, his successor, the Khalifa Abdullahi al-Taishi, attempts to press his successful fundamentalist revolution into southern Egypt, but is defeated by British and Egyptian forces at Ginnis. Nevertheless, the Mahdiyya has effectively extended its control over the entire Sudan, with the British maintaining only a nominal presence at Suakin.

11 March 1896: The abandonment of the Sudan proves deeply unpopular in Britain, and by 1896 changes in the international balance of power prompt Britain to intervene anew. Colonel, later Major-General, Herbert Kitchener, the *Sirdar* (commander-in-chief) of the Anglo-Egyptian army, is instructed to invade the northern province of Dongola, and builds a railway to facilitate the advance of his troops.

12 7 June 1896: Kitchener disperses Mahdist forces in Dongola at Firkeh.

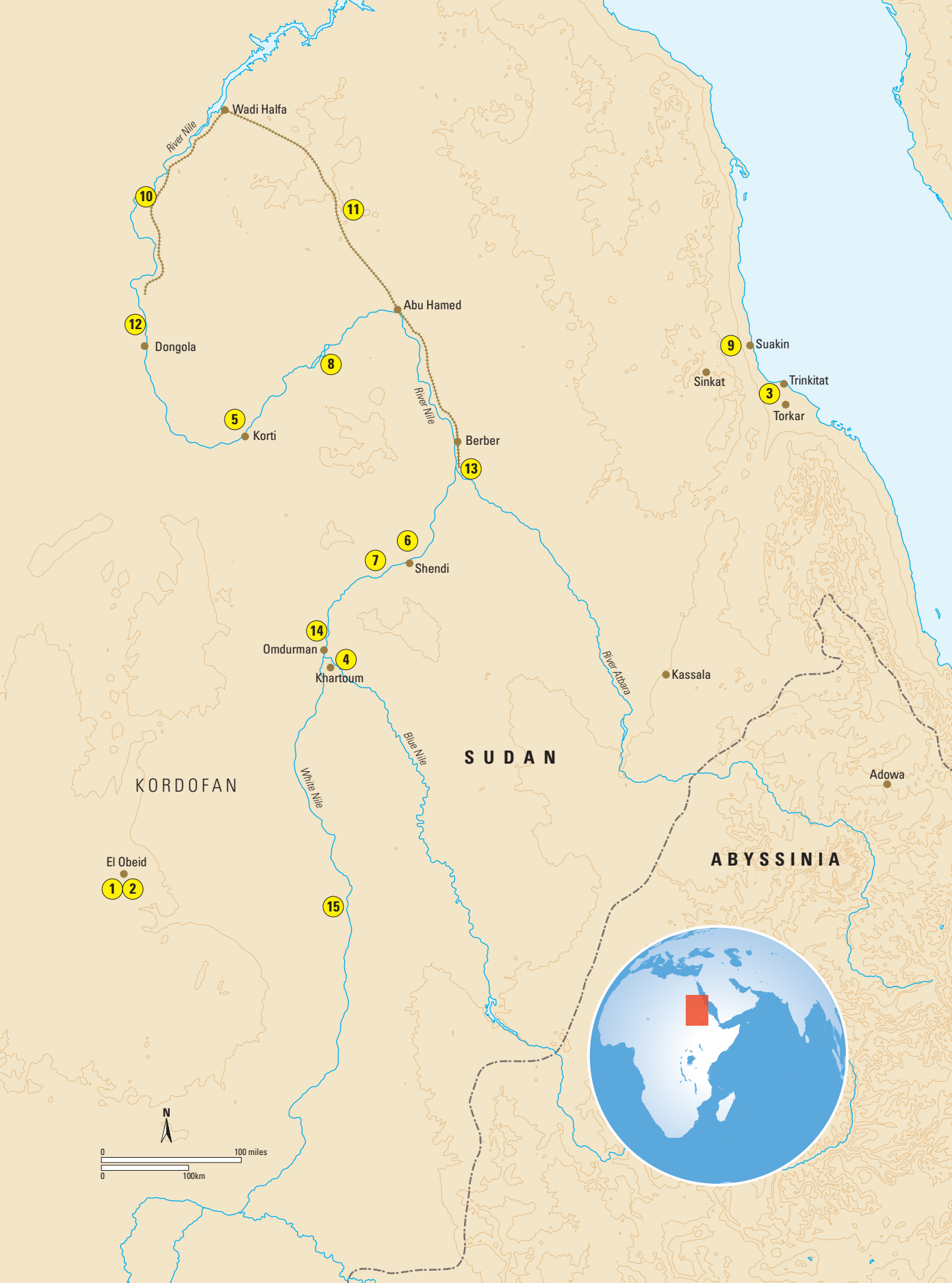
13 8 April 1898: Reinforced by British troops, Kitchener attacks and captures the *amir* Mahmud wad Ahmad's encampment on the Atbara River.

14 2 September 1898: Kitchener advances along the Nile and is attacked by the main Mahdist concentration north of Omdurman, near Khartoum. The Mahdists are decisively defeated, and Omdurman occupied. The Khalifa withdraws to the Kordofan.

15 25 November 1899: With the Khalifa having retained considerable influence in southern and western Sudan, the British send an expedition under Colonel Francis Wingate. The Khalifa's forces are dispersed at Um Dibaykarat and the Khalifa himself is killed, ending Mahdist rule in the Sudan.

of enigmatic but firm principles that he placed ahead of political expediency – and he would prove difficult to control.

Gordon arrived in Khartoum on 18 February 1884. Seeing no practical way of evacuating the inhabitants, he refused to return home, and instead immediately set about preparing the city for defence.



The Opposing Sides

ORIGINS AND RECRUITMENT

British

Although the British Army of the 1880s was on the cusp of significant change, the class distinctions which had characterized it in 1837, when Queen Victoria ascended the throne, would remain throughout her lengthy reign. The Duke of Wellington had believed that only those born to the gentry were naturally inclined to leadership, and throughout the Victorian era a career as an officer was regarded as honourable among the middle and upper classes. Although a small number of aristocrats found places in fashionable regiments, the bulk of infantry officers were drawn from the minor gentry, from second or third sons of smaller land-holding families who did not stand to inherit an estate but who did not fancy the life of a rural clergyman and who shared the common disdain for trade.

Although the purchase of commissions had been abandoned in 1871, rates of pay for junior officers scarcely stretched to the expenses of life in the mess and a degree of private income remained essential. There were, however, other compensations in the form of social respect, the hope of promotion, and a dash of glamour reflected in scarlet dress uniforms and the medals. On garrison duty at home, several months of furlough a year allowed opportunities to slot back into a civilian lifestyle of hunting, shooting and fishing. By contrast, overseas service meant years away from Britain, often with little hope of active service to spice it up; and while the Victorian public romanticized the idea of a heroic death in battle, such losses were far rarer than the slow attrition through dysentery, malaria and other frightening diseases that haunted the far-flung outposts of Empire.

In contrast, the men in the ranks were drawn from the opposite end of British society. Traditionally, men enlisted because they were desperate; at a



time when there was no social security net and when many jobs were seasonal or temporary, enlistment was a last alternative to starvation. At the beginning of the Victorian era troops enlisted for 12 years' service with an opportunity to re-enlist for a further 12 – which, given the toll it took on health and stamina, effectively amounted to service for life. In an attempt to make service attractive to a better class of recruit the British Army had lowered the term in 1870 to six years' service and six with the Reserve. By the 1880s many of those who had enlisted under the old system were beginning to pass through, and the ranks were increasingly full of younger 'short service' men.

If Army life was one of grinding routine and harsh discipline, however, it was not without attractions. The pay of a shilling a day was subject to all manner of stoppages for lost or replaced kit before being paid, but soldiers did at least receive three meals a day, and could count on some sort of roof over their heads, neither of which were guaranteed in civilian life. Throughout the 1880s there were attempts to reduce soldiers' traditional dependence on recreational drinking and to raise standards of education, and Army life afforded at least the possibility of adventure and of a sense of comradeship and belonging.

Mahdist

Mahdist forces were very different from those of the British Army in that only towards the end of the *Mahdiyya* – the Mahdist state – were there any units maintained to a degree of permanence like professional full-time soldiers. For the most part, particularly during the early campaigns, the Mahdist forces remained a collection of regional forces drawn together by their allegiance to the Mahdi. Both the Mahdi and his successor, the Khalifa Abdullahi al-Taishi, were, like many *amirs* and *shaikhs*, literate, educated men who developed a subtle bureaucracy for administering the Mahdiyya, but the majority of their followers were illiterate peasants, whether recruited among the semi-nomadic tribes of the western deserts or the more settled agricultural communities along the banks of the Nile. As such, until the later development of a more

ABOVE LEFT

Recruits await a medical examination before being enlisted in the British Army in the 1860s. Such was the shortage of manpower that these examinations were usually cursory, and this illustration gives little doubt as to the social origins of the recruits. By 1880, however, serious efforts were under way to improve the ordinary soldier's lot. (Author's collection)

ABOVE RIGHT

British troops of the 1st Grenadier Guards are pictured on campaign in the late 1890s. Note the quilted curtain worn to protect the neck and reduce the risk of sunstroke. (Author's collection)



ABOVE LEFT

The distinctive badge of allegiance to the Mahdist cause – the patched smock or *jibbeh*. This fine example, probably belonging to an *amir*, reflects the standardization of design that followed the Mahdist domination of the Sudan from the late 1880s; during the earlier campaigns there was considerable local variation in designs. (By courtesy of Michael Graham-Stewart)



ABOVE RIGHT

A particularly ornate Mahdist *jibbeh* from the 1890s, of the sort manufactured centrally, and with symmetrical patches on the front, arms and back; the distinctive patches on the sides of the skirt seem to have been an indication of rank or status. (Sepia Times/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

permanent army, they remained a citizen militia who could be mobilized to fight on a temporary and often local basis, continued in their civilian lives the rest of the time, and were controlled under the constraints of the Mahdist elite who ruled under the precepts of Sharia law.

The majority of the Mahdi's followers – whom he called *ansar* (helpers) – were illiterate Sudanese poor among whom the Mahdi's message of the rejection of the unpopular 'Turkish' regime resonated. The Mahdi had proclaimed a *jihad* (holy war) against the Egyptians and religious fervour was undeniably a factor in motivating ordinary *ansar*; perhaps more significant, however, was the allegiance of their local leaders, the *amirs* or *shaikhs*, some of whom firmly embraced Mahdism in its early days while others vacillated according to the Mahdist movement's successes or failures. Indeed, as the movement grew and adopted an uncompromising attitude towards loyalty, some groups joined out of necessity rather than belief. Mahdism had proved to be particularly popular among the semi-nomadic cattle-owning tribes of the Kordofan, in western Sudan, some of whom, like the Baqqara, already enjoyed a reputation as raiders and would form the core of the early *ansar*, and their numbers were swollen by tribes living along the Nile as the movement gained momentum. In the east, around Suakin, the Bija's allegiance was largely dependent on the charisma of 'Uthman Diqna; yet the Bija also demonstrated how tribal politics bisected common allegiances. The Bija were divided into several distinct sections and while the Hadandawa, Amarar and Beni Amer, who were committed to 'Uthman Diqna, supported the movement, the Bisharin, Arteiga and Ashraf, among whom he held less influence, were less committed to 'Uthman Diqna, and to Mahdism itself.

The Mahdi recognized early on the distinctions between the various groups under his command and after the fall of El Obeid instructed his followers to adopt a distinct uniform as a way of stressing their common allegiance and purpose. After January 1883 – and with the capture of thousands of Egyptian rifles – the Mahdi established the *jihadiyya*, the first attempt at a Mahdist regular unit. The *jihadiyya* were armed with firearms and many of them were black Africans from the southern Sudan who were either hunters or who had been part of the slave armies maintained by local *shaikhs* and

involved in slave-raiding. Cut off from their own societies, these men, known as *Bazingers*, were fed by their owners and gained prestige through fighting; when their *shaikhs* joined the Mahdists they were easily welded to the evolving Mahdist army. So too – perhaps paradoxically – were men captured from the Egyptian Army. The Egyptian Army was raised under conditions akin to slavery, either through youths promised to the Army in childhood, or by men forcibly impressed. They received very little pay – often supplied in arrears, or sometimes in kind – and limited rations, and their lack of commitment to the Egyptian Army was woefully demonstrated by their dismal early performance against the Mahdi. Those captured were forcibly impressed into the *ansar*, and while some were undoubtedly compelled to fight, even in chains, many saw little difference in fighting for one overbearing master than another. Some groups changed sides more than once, being captured, fighting for the Mahdi, but then abandoning the Mahdiyya and returning to re-join the Egyptian Army when the opportunity presented itself.

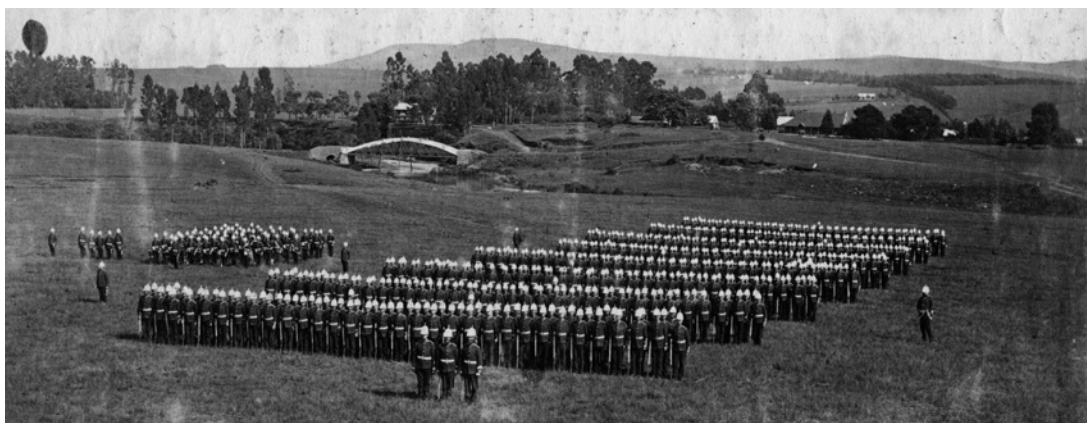
In the early days of the uprisings the *ansar* forces included large numbers of desert-dwellers who were used to the life of moving encampments and easily followed the Mahdi in his progress across the western deserts, living in tents or temporary huts made of branches and grass. Many of the more settled tribes who lived along the banks of the Nile initially only made limited forays outside their familiar territory, and fought at their fiercest when the fighting came to them.

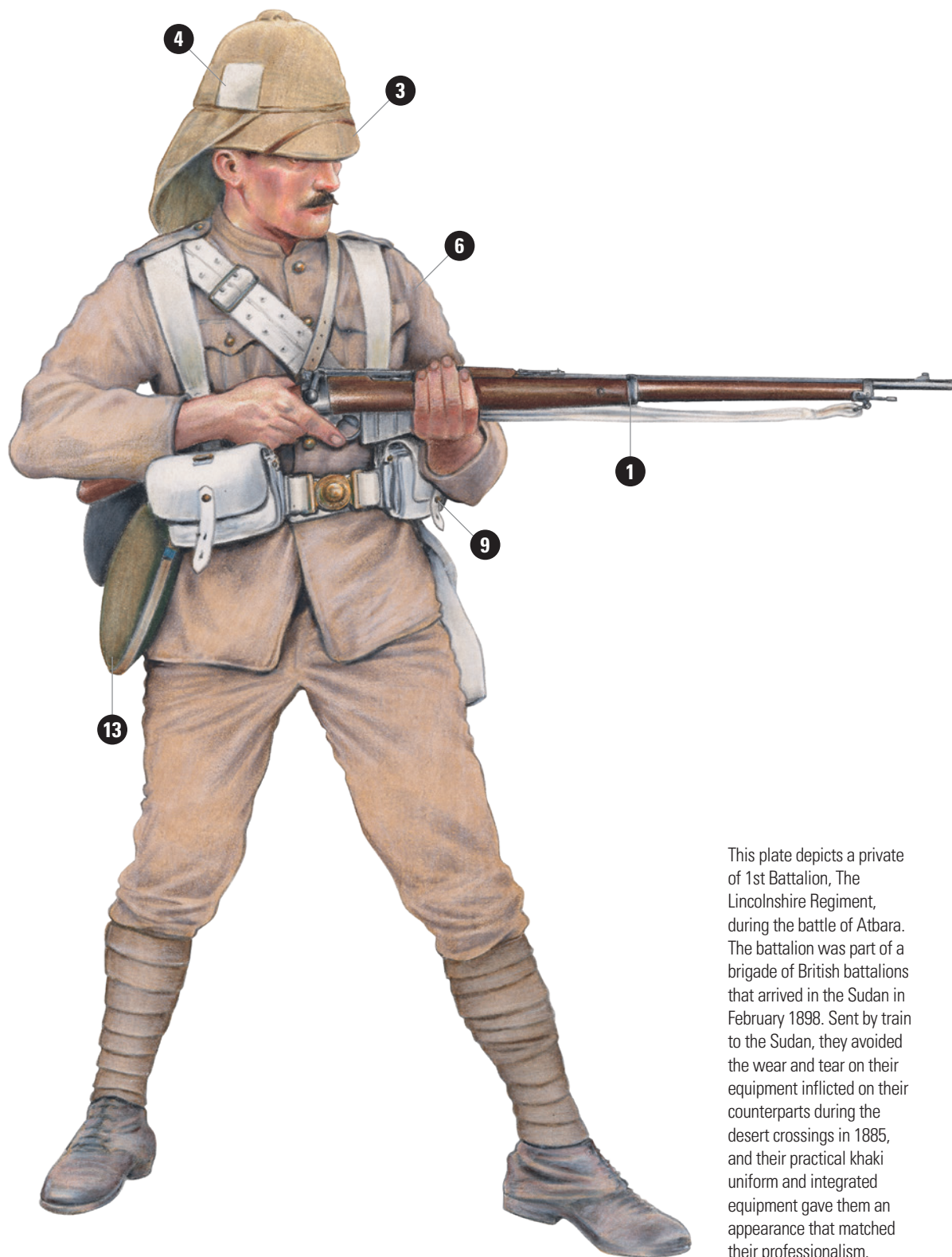
ORGANIZATION AND FORCE STRUCTURE

British

Infantry units would provide the backbone of British forces in the Sudan in both the 1880s and the 1890s campaigns. At a time when vital reconnaissance and pursuit operations were the preserve of cavalry, limited mounted support was available in the Sudan, although the harshness of the terrain and the scarcity of water and fodder meant that only a handful of regular cavalry regiments were deployed, most of which left their fine English horses in Cairo and were re-equipped with hardier Syrian ponies instead. For much

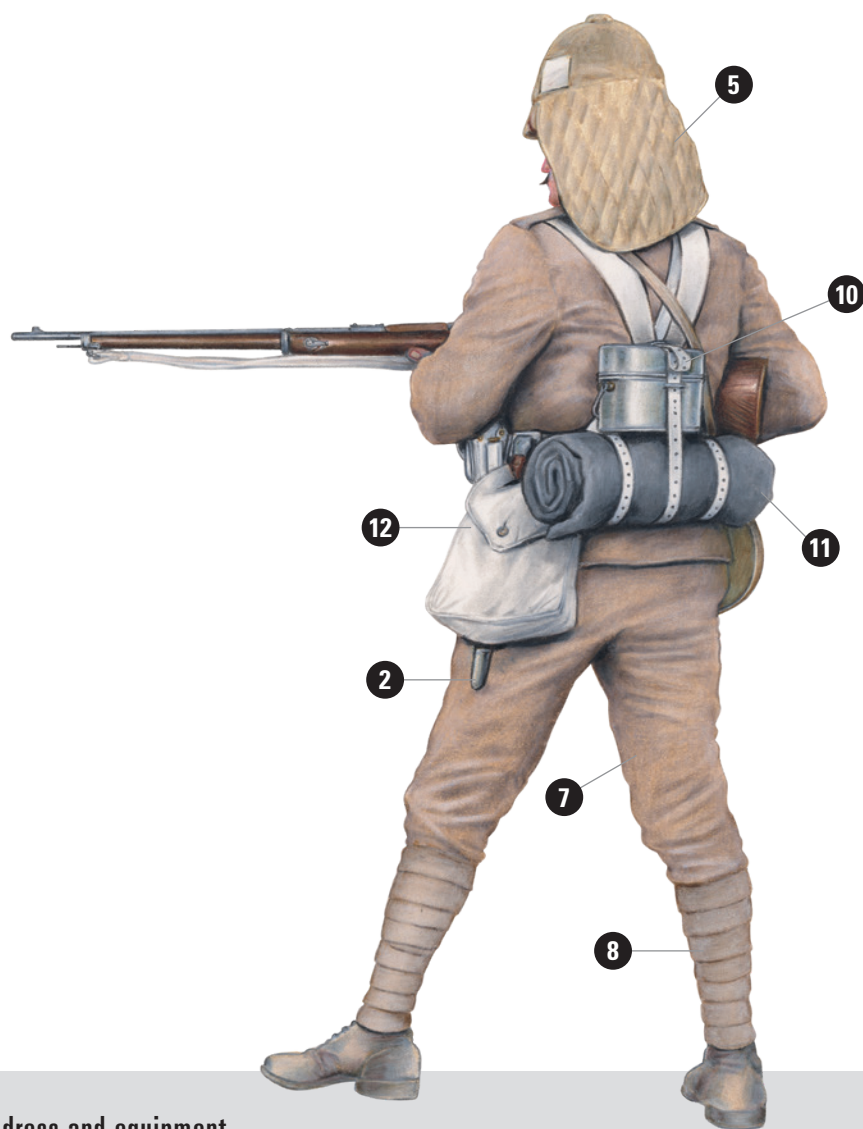
A British infantry battalion on parade in southern Africa c.1877, drawn up in companies. Although the British Army was moving towards more flexible infantry tactics, reflecting the greater destructiveness of battlefield weapons, manoeuvring in close-order formations remained a fundamental part of infantry training and would prove invaluable in the Sudan. Within a few years of this photograph being taken troops would take to the field in various forms of khaki rather than scarlet. (Author's collection)





This plate depicts a private of 1st Battalion, The Lincolnshire Regiment, during the battle of Atbara. The battalion was part of a brigade of British battalions that arrived in the Sudan in February 1898. Sent by train to the Sudan, they avoided the wear and tear on their equipment inflicted on their counterparts during the desert crossings in 1885, and their practical khaki uniform and integrated equipment gave them an appearance that matched their professionalism.

Atbara, 8 April 1898



Weapons, dress and equipment

This man's weapon is the .303 Lee-Metford Mk II rifle (1), the first bolt-action magazine rifle adopted by the British Army; this was lighter than the old .450 Martini-Henry rifle, had a higher velocity, was accurate to greater ranges, and carried ten rounds in the magazine, allowing for a greatly increased rate of fire. A 12in sword bayonet (2) is carried in a scabbard on the left hip.

In 1896 khaki was adopted by all British Army troops on active service, following a practice that had been standard in India for decades, and it was first worn extensively during the 1898 reconquest of the Sudan. The 'foreign service' helmet (3) is worn with a khaki cover, and as the entire uniform offered few obvious means for regimental designation, coloured patches (4) are worn on either side to indicate his unit. Some battalions wore a patch of scarlet with embroidered regimental title, cut from their home-service dress, but soldiers of the 1st Lincolnshire, who fought at both Atbara and

Omdurman, wore a patch of white cloth. As an added protection against the sun a detachable quilted neck-cover (5) is worn over the back of the helmet. The frock (6), trousers (7) and puttees (8) are of a standardized khaki-drill colour.

Equipment is the 1894 modification of the Slade-Wallace integrated valise pattern, with 50 rounds of .303 ammunition carried in each of the pouches (9). A mess-tin (10) and greatcoat (11) are incorporated at the back of the equipment. A haversack (12) on his left hip contains the soldier's necessities, including kit to keep his equipment functioning, private belongings and any unconsumed rations. Water is carried in the 1890-pattern circular enamelled water-bottle (13), which is covered in khaki felt, both to insulate the contents and to render it less conspicuous.

the same reason, artillery and machine-gun support was limited to the Royal Navy and Royal Marines in the 1880s, but was considerably more significant in 1896–98.

The standard tactical unit was the infantry battalion, and despite Secretary of State for War Edward Cardwell's reforms of 1868–74 this still consisted in the field at full strength of a headquarters detachment, band and eight companies, each of 100 men. During the Khartoum expedition, however, because of the difficulties of the terrain and the need for speed it was decided to adopt a unique experiment. In the southern African wars of the late 1870s small units of mounted infantry were raised from among the infantry to act as a more flexible and mobile force, using horses to transport themselves and then dismounting and fighting on foot. In an attempt to improve the mobility of the infantry during the Khartoum expedition it was decided to train them as mounted infantry but riding camels instead of horses. The Camel Corps consisted of four detachments, styled 'regiments', each with a strength of just under 400 all ranks, a headquarters and companies each consisting of two officers, four NCOs, a trumpeter and 38 privates. All four were composite units and drawn from volunteers in some of the finest regiments in the British Army, three from cavalry regiments – including the Household Cavalry – and the fourth from infantry. They were all intended to fight as mounted infantry, using camels for transport but dismounting to fight on foot.

These two *ansar* wear the uniform that characterized the Mahdist movement after the fall of Khartoum in January 1885. (Author's collection)



Mahdist

The early rapid expansion of the Mahdist movement prompted the Mahdi to attempt to impose a degree of organization upon his followers, and the need to reconcile differences within its essentially tribal and often local nature would become a feature of Mahdist administration.

Initially, the Mahdi divided the *ansar* into three 'flags' (*rayya*), a flag being both an organizational unit and the standard which identified it. These were trusted to the command of the Mahdi's three *khalifas*, or apostles. The Black Flag, *al-rayya al-zarqa*, was commanded by his principal lieutenant the Khalifa Abdullahi al-Taishi and was drawn from the western tribes; the Red Flag, *al-rayya al-hamra*, led by the Khalifa Muhammad al-Sharif, was drawn from the tribes along the Nile north of Khartoum; while the Green Flag, *al-rayya al-khadra*, led by the Khalifa Ali Hilu, was drawn from the tribes between the White and Blue Niles. 'Uthman Diqna's Bija remained a separate command.

By the 1890s the Mahdist Army had developed a semi-professional structure, and Mahdist regulars of the *jihadiyya*, and the later Khalifa's bodyguard, the *Mulazimiyya*, were housed in mud-brick barracks in Omdurman and the provincial capitals. They received pay and provisions, and were entitled to claim loot from any victories. Each 'flag' was further organized along military lines, divided into four sections, one administrative and three combative (comprising cavalry, swordmen and spearmen, and a detachment of *jihadiyya*). The *jihadiyya* were organized into 'standards' of 100 men, each commanded by an *amir*, and further subdivided into sections of 25 men. The system was imperfect, however, as the various elements were not evenly distributed, and it never fully overcame the Mahdist movement's essentially tribal and local nature.

MOTIVATION AND IDENTITY

British

As members of a full-time professional body, governed by its own laws and codes of behaviour and existing largely outside the norms of contemporary civilian society, British Army soldiers were bound by common allegiances and experiences which transcended the huge social gulfs between the officers and their men. Despite the fact that in daily duties during peacetime most officers had only limited contact with the men under their command, leaving the majority of the implementation of daily routines to senior NCOs, the Army system fostered a close sense of familial belonging through allegiance to regimental traditions and to the symbols of common loyalty to the Crown.

Even for those who were used to Army life overseas in the Empire, however – extremes of temperature, radically different landscapes, life among peoples whose cultures were so different as to seem inexpressibly alien, and the lurking threat of debilitating diseases – the Sudan offered particular challenges. Soldiers complained that the barracks afforded them in Egypt were often in disrepair, were hot, airless, dirty and infested with insects; but even these were comfortable compared to the practicalities of life on campaign, where improvised bivouacs were the norm and nights were often spent sleeping out on the sand with only a blanket for cover. While the desert along the Nile was so hot that sunburn, heat exhaustion and eye complaints were common risks, the area around Suakin had its own micro-climate with high humidity and sudden tropical downpours. Dust storms were common in the desert. Water was rationed and was usually warm and unpalatable, and Army rations remained the standard combination of hard biscuit and meat – the latter sometimes preserved in salt, which only exacerbated the prevailing sense of thirst. Troops passing through Egypt could at least buy extra provisions along the way, including locally made bread, figs and goats' milk, although these became unavailable as the advance moved beyond sympathetic villages. One medical officer at Suakin did succeed in procuring oranges for the men as a source of fresh vitamins. If the passage down the Nile offered the more imaginative the chance to marvel at passing ancient temples, palm groves and hippos and crocodiles in the river, the appeal of the spectacular sunsets soon faded and most soldiers found the desert harsh and unforgiving.

Although the traditional red coats were replaced by more practical and less conspicuous grey ones for the 1880s campaigns, and by khaki a decade later, the mimosa thorn-bush snagged and tore both equally, and mercilessly scratched at the legs of kilted Highlanders. The desert sand was either soft and exhausting to march upon or hard and gravelly, which destroyed the soldiers' boots. The unusual concentration of men and animals in such numbers led to occasional outbreaks of dysentery, cholera and even smallpox. Nevertheless, while both officers and men regarded the landscape itself as hostile, they continued to look forward to active service as a break from the grinding routine of peacetime life, and for the prospect of adventure and distinction it afforded.



The *jihadiyya* were the earliest of the Mahdist state's attempts to organize a centralized army that was not dependent on local tribal loyalties, and many of them were recruited among black African groups in the southern Sudan. Although by the 1890s a number of other units had been formed, including the elite *Mulazimiyya*, the Khalifa's personal guard, the *jihadiyya* remained a crucial part of the *ansar* forces.

Atbara, 8 April 1898



Weapons, dress and equipment

Most *jihadiyya* carried the .43 No. 1 Remington Military rolling-block rifle (1), which was captured in large numbers from Egyptian Army garrisons in the 1880s, although weapons captured in other actions, including the Martini-Henry rifle, were sometimes used.

By the 1890s the Mahdist uniform had become largely standardized, with the *jibbeh* (2) being manufactured centrally at regional garrisons. Although the colours varied, the pattern was largely consistent – a white smock with a pointed coloured patch around the collar, patches down the front and back symmetrically, on the side of the skirts and, usually, one on each sleeve. Patches were often picked out with an embroidered trim. This man is an ordinary *ansar*; an *amir* could be recognized by the better quality

of workmanship in his *jibbeh*, and by a distinctive spade-shaped pocket design worn on the left breast. He also wears loose white trousers (3). The turban (4), worn around a skullcap (5), is also worn in a distinctive style, with the loose end hanging behind the left ear, and passing under the chin and over the right shoulder. Prayer beads (6) indicate a religious commitment to Islam. Although the Mahdi urged his followers to wear sandals, photographs indicate that many preferred to go barefoot.

Ammunition was carried in a locally made red leather waistbelt (7), sometimes decorated with green leather insets, which had loops around the middle for individual rounds and a long flap over-all. This was often worn over a white cummerbund.



The Mahdist rising appealed to a number of disparate tribal groups across the Sudan including the Bija in the Red Sea littoral, who would prove to be some of its most determined warriors. In the early battles they fought in their traditional costume and sporting their distinctive hairstyle. This man has a throwing stick in his hand and his shield and sword thrown over his back. (Author's collection)

Mahdist

For most ordinary *ansar*, the majority, campaigning offered a brief and dramatic interlude among the timeless routines of their daily lives. They were neither possessed of a deep-rooted warrior ethic nor of extensive experience of warfare, but being accustomed to life in a harsh terrain they could be tough and determined, and the promise of an eternity in paradise offered by *jihad* could provoke them to acts of extraordinary courage and determination.

The most distinctive badge of Mahdism was the *jibbeh*, a white smock worn by many of the Sudanese poor. The Mahdi directed that the *ansar* wear coloured patches on their *jibbehs* as a symbol of virtuous poverty. They were also to shave their heads, wear a skullcap (*taggia*) and wear their turbans (*imma*) in a distinctive fashion, the folds wound to a peak at the front and the loose end hanging behind the left ear, and passed under the chin. They were to wear loose cotton trousers (*siraval*) and a girdle of plaited straw (*karaba*). In fact it took time for these directions to take effect and to become uniform, and in many of the battles of 1883–84 the *ansar* fought in their everyday clothes, a loose robe known as a *tobe*, which was gathered around the waist or thrown over the shoulder. The Bija in the east fought initially either wearing the *tobe* or in loose trousers of white or terracotta, and they wore their hair in the distinct extravagant style which caught the attention of author and poet Rudyard Kipling and others in Britain. Even when the *ansar* began to adopt the *jibbeh* there were distinct local variations in style and it was not until the late 1880s that the characteristic *jibbeh*, with its large patches on the front, back and sleeves, become commonplace, and by the 1890s factories had been established in Omdurman to produce them.

LOGISTICS

British

For the British the terrain of the Sudan was almost as much of an enemy as the *ansar*. Hot, largely dry and rugged, with no developed roads, covered in places with tough mimosa thorn-bush and with only sparse and patchy grass-cover, it was largely impractical to the sort of wheeled transport upon which the British relied throughout the world, and indeed was hostile to most pack animals apart from the camel. British strategic success would depend not merely on being able to defeat the *ansar* in battle but also on establishing an effective supply chain to remote fronts in order to be able to do so.

Even at a time when the British Army was accustomed to the challenges posed by the very different landscapes in which it was obliged to wage war, the Sudan would prove particularly problematic. The Army needed to carry its shelter and provisions – at the very minimum a ration of meat and biscuit daily, tea, coffee, sugar and salt – with it, and in the extreme heat and arid conditions of the desert it required water in large quantities. In India and southern Africa the Army's advance was characterized by the long train of bullock-wagons following it, but in the Sudan there were no transport oxen, nor the feed to sustain them. Instead, the Army employed large numbers of transport camels and mules, overseen around Suakin by civilians brought



from India, and during the Nile campaign by the troops themselves. These camel trains were themselves slow-moving and difficult to control, and any expedition had to make provision for them to be secured against attack. From the beginning the British adopted a tactic that was largely outdated in conventional warfare – the square. Against a fast-moving enemy such as the Mahdists it offered an opportunity to provide a secure defence on all sides, to maximize firepower and to offer shelter in the centre to the baggage animals. In the noise, fright and confusion of battle, however, managing the terrified baggage animals became a challenge in itself.

Once British troops had arrived at Suakin in February 1884 they became embroiled in an essentially localized campaign against 'Uthman Digna's Bija. Rather than attempt to conquer or occupy large tracts of land, successive Egyptian and British commanders attempted to confront and defeat the Bija, usually within a 20-mile radius of Suakin, and often following the same routes and fighting battles almost on the same ground. While these battles were fought, however, a separate campaign was waged to relive Khartoum and to rescue Gordon and the Egyptians trapped within the nascent Mahdist state.

This campaign – the Gordon Relief Expedition – was one of the most dramatic of all Victorian expeditions, and it was waged against the topography of the Sudan as much as against the Mahdiyya. In order to reach Khartoum the British had to move troops across remarkably inhospitable terrain, initially following the transport artery of the Nile and then – when the Nile bent inconveniently in a great loop in the wrong direction – making a dash across

This illustration shows Brigadier-General Sir Charles Wilson's dash for Khartoum by steamer at the end of January 1885. The handful of British infantry on board wore scarlet in deference to General Wolseley's instructions that the final approach to Khartoum should be made in traditional red coats; in fact, although Wilson's steamers reached the outskirts of the city just days after it fell, his force was far too small to have been able to provide Gordon with practical help anyway. (Author's collection)



This photograph shows a British officer's bivouac; note the Sudanese shield, and the local wooden bed pressed into service. (Author's collection)

the open desert. Under such circumstances, and despite the emphasis upon transported water, the presence of wells in the desert achieved crucial strategic significance.

In the 1880s General Wolseley shipped over 7,000 tons of supplies along the Nile and stockpiled them at Korti, but even so he miscalculated the number of transport camels needed to supply the desert shortcut, resulting in a delay while a supply depot was established at Gakdul Wells, midway across the desert. Troops were issued a ration of a pint of water a day – two pints during the desert crossing – and the water was carried from the Nile in skin camel-panniers, while at Suakin desalinated sea water was used; both were equally unpalatable.

During the 1890s campaign the situation was greatly improved by the building of the Sudan military railway, which bypassed the old Nile route and allowed Colonel (later Major-General) Herbert Kitchener, the *Sirdar* (commander-in-chief) of the Anglo-Egyptian army, to transport men and supplies directly to the front as he advanced, extending the railway behind him as he went.

Mahdist

The logistical situation was easier for the Mahdists as they were operating on their own terrain. Many of the Mahdi's early followers were semi-nomadic Baqqara Arabs, who were used to moving their herds of cattle, camels and goats to take advantage of shifting grazing patterns, while in the east the Bija were operating close to their own settlements. As more settled agricultural tribes along the Nile joined the Mahdist movement it became possible to organize stockpiles of grain, dates and other produce, and move them in support of *ansar* armies on camel-panniers. Nevertheless, the unusual accumulation of people following the Mahdi's progress meant that *ansar* armies moved from one source of water to another, and food shortages were inevitable. The Khalifa worked to introduce central supply depots in Khartoum and regional centres to support the standing garrisons he established there. Even so, such supplies were perishable and subject both to natural crop variations, and the political manoeuvring that sometimes saw core followers given preference over more peripheral groups.

On the march, *ansar* armies were usually accompanied by large numbers of camp followers, including women, who assisted in carrying and preparing food, but had themselves to be fed. Although traditional weapons were manufactured within the Sudan, the largest single source of rifles and ammunition remained the huge quantities captured at El Obeid, Shaikan and Khartoum.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

British

As a professional body the various British Army expeditions were composed of men who expected to command or be commanded. All were used to military life, and many had experience of earlier campaigns; indeed General Wolseley, who commanded the Gordon Relief Expedition, was one of the most experienced soldiers in the British Army, having previously served in Burma, the Crimea and India and commanded campaigns in Canada, West Africa, mopping-up operations in Zululand, and had only recently defeated the nationalist revolt in Egypt. Wolseley was an ambitious, masterful and sometimes headstrong commander who was unafraid to innovate and believed in careful planning.

Although the British Army remained an essentially conservative institution, often needing to make the same mistake several times before learning the lesson, it was by 1880 experienced in a wide range of colonial warfare in different theatres around the world, and many of its younger officers increasingly aspired not only to understand their profession but to master it, encouraged by training institutions such as the Royal Military College and Staff College.

The realities of campaign life broke down at least some of the barriers between officers and men that prevailed during peacetime. Officers, who were usually only seen amid the formality of the parade ground, now became familiar figures within the confines of the battalion camp. Nevertheless, most



ABOVE LEFT

Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stewart, who commanded the Desert Column's dash to relieve Khartoum and at Abu Klea, was mortally wounded at Abu Kru on 19 January 1885. He succumbed to his wounds nearly a month later, on 16 February, having been promoted to major-general in the intervening period. (Ron Sheeley Collection)



ABOVE RIGHT

Colonel (later Major-General) Herbert Kitchener was the *Sirdar* (commander-in-chief) of the Anglo-Egyptian army during the re-conquest of the Sudan, 1896–99. (Author's collection)

infantrymen remained most familiar with their company commanders – a captain and two lieutenants – and the most conspicuous authority figures remained their NCOs.

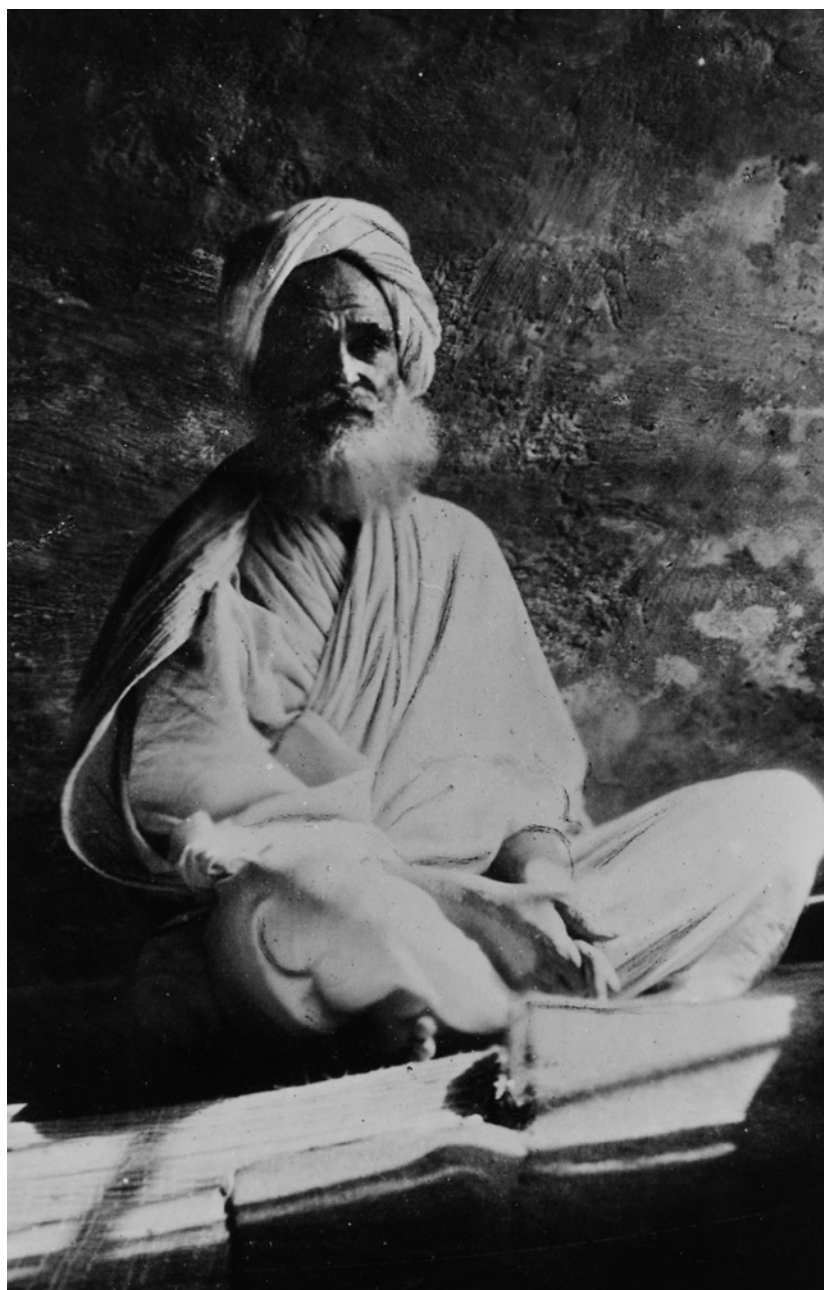
NCOs were appointed from within the ranks from soldiers who had proved sufficiently competent, diligent and sober. Senior NCOs – colour sergeants and sergeant-majors – held great sway over their men and much of the discipline and control within a battalion depended upon them. Their status ensured that they enjoyed their own mess, but while they bridged the gap in authority to the officer class the almost total lack of social mobility within the regiment meant that senior NCOs rarely, if ever, rose to become officers. The effective functioning of a battalion was therefore largely dependent upon the easy interaction of two largely self-contained worlds.

By the 1880s communication in the field was increasingly sophisticated, carried out by semaphore (signalling flags), heliograph (sun-flashes), and increasingly by mobile telegraphs. In combat, orders were conveyed verbally where possible, for clarity, but in writing where greater distances were involved, and passed from a general to his staff, and thence to battalion commanders. Battalion commanders instructed their company officers who directed the deployment of their troops including by means of bugle calls, which conveyed instructions succinctly and could more easily be heard over the din of battle. NCOs directed the placement of men within the company; the successful implementation of orders was therefore largely dependent upon how well they were conveyed to NCOs.

Mahdist

The Mahdist Army was different from its British counterpart in that, although some tribal elements had a reputation for raiding for cattle or slaves, there was no common military ethic, and nor were its leaders trained and experienced commanders. At the start of the Mahdist Uprising neither the Mahdi himself nor his coterie of trusted disciples had much experience of warfare, particularly against an enemy armed with large quantities of modern weapons.

Nevertheless, a number of talented military commanders emerged early in the rebellion, men such as 'Abd-al-Rahman wad al-Najumi, whose early



'Uthman abu Bakr Digna, known to the British as 'Osman Digna', was a *shaikh* of the Bija who proved to be one of Mahdism's most skilful generals. This photograph was taken late in his life. (Bristol Archives/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)



The *amir* Mahmud wad Ahmad is shown surrounded by guards from Kitchener's Sudanese troops after the battle of Atbara on 8 April 1898; he was bayoneted through the leg during the fighting, and his *jibbeh* is soaked in blood. (Author's collection)

successes over Egyptian patrols led to a command at Shaikan and then during the fall of Khartoum. In the east, around Suakin, 'Uthman Diqna waged his campaigns in accordance with directives from the Mahdi but largely without interference, and determined his own strategy. Diqna understood the loyalties and strengths of his followers, and the nature of the ground upon which he was fighting, and in his early battles easily outclassed the Egyptian forces sent against him. Despite its essentially amateur nature, between 1881 and 1883 the Mahdist high command learned from both its victories and defeats, and evolved a style of fighting that was both suited to the strengths of their followers and to the weakness of their opponents – but which could never quite match the professionalism of their enemies.

In general, *ansar* commanders led from the front, encouraging their men, and were easily recognizable by their personal banners. Although the Mahdi limited the use of music, most Sudanese groups, including the Baqqara and Bija, regarded drums as status instruments, associated with the power and prestige of individual leaders, and they were used to summon the *ansar* for war and to encourage martial spirit in attack. This reliance on dynamic leadership unfortunately exposed Mahdist commanders to enemy fire and by the 1890s many of the most ideologically committed and militarily successful had been killed. By that point the Mahdiyya had moved from expansion to consolidation and the Khalifa himself preferred more cautious strategies, discouraging his commanders from making too many risky assaults. As a result he allowed the British to advance close to Omdurman before attempting to halt them, and his commanders acted with a lack of verve that contrasted sharply with the Khartoum campaign.

WEAPONS, TRAINING AND TACTICS

British

In 1883 the standard British infantry firearm remained the Martini-Henry rifle, first issued in the early 1870s, and by then extensively used in southern Africa and Afghanistan. It was a robust, easy-to-use, single-shot breech-loader that was sighted up to 1,000yd, although only the best shots could expect a proportion of hits at that range; its most effective battlefield ranges were at less than 400yd. It fired a .450-calibre bullet from a black-powder charge that produced not only a thick cough of white smoke but also, after several rounds, a thumping recoil; despite this, the weapon was popular among the men, who placed great faith in its capabilities. Like most weapons it was occasionally prone to stress after repeated use, and in the Sudan the combination of heat and sand led to an above-average number of incidents of jamming. At close quarters it could be fitted with an 18in steel socket bayonet, although the Camel Corps regiments were issued with a heavier sword bayonet.

Once he had learned the basics of drill – how to take orders, to march, stand and to shoot – a recruit was taught how to manoeuvre alongside his comrades, and was initiated into a life of repetitive routine in which each day was passed in the same duties. The ordinary soldier was expected to obey orders without question, and discipline for those who did not had traditionally been harsh. The British Army of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15) had dished out floggings with savage frequency but the same shift in public opinion which had tried to wean the soldier away from drink and educate him had, by 1880, resulted in flogging being abolished, first as a peacetime punishment and

In this depiction of the battle of Abu Kru, Stewart's men are shown advancing in square screened by skirmishers. Stewart himself was mortally wounded on this occasion. (Author's collection)





ABOVE LEFT

In this depiction of the British attack on Mahmud wad Ahmad's *zariba* on the Atbara on 8 April 1898, troops of the British Brigade advance in columns of companies. (Author's collection)



ABOVE RIGHT

The British war correspondent John Cameron was killed at Abu Kru on 19 January 1885 as he reached for a tin of sardines from his servant. Throughout the operations of the Desert Column the *jihadiyya* were at their most effective harassing British movements from a distance. (Author's collection)

OPPOSITE

The Remington rolling-block rifle was the standard infantry weapon of the Egyptian forces in the Sudan. Large numbers of these weapons fell into Mahdist hands after the fall of El Obeid on 17 January 1883 and the Hicks disaster at Shaikan on 5 November 1883, and they became the main weapon carried by the organized *jihadiyya* riflemen. (© Royal Armouries PR.6319)

then, following a much-publicised upsurge in the field during the Anglo-Zulu War (1879), on active service too, and the Army had begun to move away from physical punishments towards fines for minor offences and custodial sentences for more serious ones.

At the start of the Victorian period the Army placed great emphasis on manoeuvring in solid formations – columns and lines – and much of the repetitive peacetime drill was designed to teach a soldier how to respond instinctively to orders and to deploy in close ranks. By the 1870s, however, an awareness of the longer reach and greater destructive power of modern firearms had led to a shift towards more flexible and sometimes open-order formations. The 1877 training manual – the *Field Exercise Manual* – advocated the principle of attack in depth in which a battalion would deploy two companies in line in extended order, two more behind in support, and the remaining four in reserve. The two forward companies were to press forward, firing as they went, and fed by their supports until they had achieved fire superiority over the enemy when they would charge with the bayonet, supported by the reserve.

When skirmishing a company would form two lines, each man three paces apart (at the discretion of the commanding officer), the rear rank placed in the gaps between the men in the front rank. Firing was usually carried out while kneeling, and to advance the rear rank would move through the front rank, kneel, fire, and the process would be repeated. Although offensive operations would occur in the Sudan, British troops more often fought on the defensive, in which case the preferred tactic was for a force to fall back into a square with at least two ranks – usually one kneeling and one standing – on all sides. Experience in Zululand in 1879 had proved that against a fast-moving enemy intending to fight at close quarters the square not only maximized firepower on all sides but also provided a solid wall of men that could not be outflanked on any side.

The British Army still placed great faith in the psychological effect of the bayonet at close quarters, and in training troops were taught a full range of bayonet techniques. Troops were given practical musketry instruction, but

this was constrained by an annual limit of 200 rounds per man for range firing and indeed many battalion commanders were reluctant to squander so many rounds, so troops were sometimes sent into the field having only ever fired a handful of rounds.

Mahdist

The Mahdists were equipped with a number of types of firearms captured during their early victories, but primarily with the .43 Remington rolling-block rifle. Those *ansar* who did not have access to firearms were armed with weapons that were traditional across the Sudan. Most popular was the *kaskara*, a straight sword with a simple cross-guard hilt and a blade, sharpened on both sides, about 3ft long. Many *ansar* also carried spears in a variety of styles, but mostly with large leaf-shaped blades and a haft about 6ft long, and which could be used for both stabbing and throwing. In the eastern Sudan the Bija had traditionally carried large round shields with a central boss made of tough hide and these were a feature of their early successes over Egyptian forces. As they began to adopt Mahdist dress towards the end of 1884 they used them in battle less frequently, however. Some *ansar* living on the Nile also carried oval shields made of hide stretched over a wooden frame, but for the most part the later *ansar* went into battle unprotected.

Despite the attempts to introduce a regular element into the Mahdist armies the *ansar* remained largely a citizen army. There were occasional parades and musters but nothing in the way of formal training, and Mahdist tactics therefore recognized the need to bring their shock-troops – the ordinary *ansar* armed with close-quarter weapons – to contact as quickly as possible. Although horsemen from the Baqqara and other western tribes were often included in Mahdist armies they were, like their British counterparts, largely confined to scouting, raiding and pursuing a broken enemy; and the outcome of a battle was usually dependent upon the success of the *ansar* infantry.

Although the *jihadiyya* included many experienced riflemen they were seldom deployed in formations to provide concentrated directed firepower in battle; instead, they were used as skirmishers to soften up the enemy in preparation for a sudden fierce rush. Often the *jihadiyya* were deployed to harass the enemy's approach, frequently for days before a battle took place, and the constant sniping was both destructive and damaging to the enemy's morale. Mahdist commanders would try to fight on ground which allowed them to move their swordmen and spearmen as close as possible to the enemy in safety before committing to an attack, often using hills or *khors* (gullies) to mask their approach in order to minimize the time they were exposed to return fire. They would then launch sudden fierce attacks, aiming for any weak spots in the enemy's formations. Since they were committed to *jihad* the assault groups were often able to withstand heavy casualties during an attack and their determination often had a demoralizing effect on the enemy. During the early campaigns many Egyptian formations collapsed and the men were easily cut down or speared as they tried to run; on some occasions only the distraction caused by the urge to loot captured baggage prevented the Mahdists from completely annihilating their enemy.



A quilted Mahdist coat and helmet. These coats were worn under chain-mail armour by mounted Mahdist *amirs* during parades, and many were looted by British troops from Mahdist armouries after the battle of Omdurman. There is no evidence, however, that they were worn into battle. (© Royal Armouries XXVIA.137)



Abu Klea

17 January 1885

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

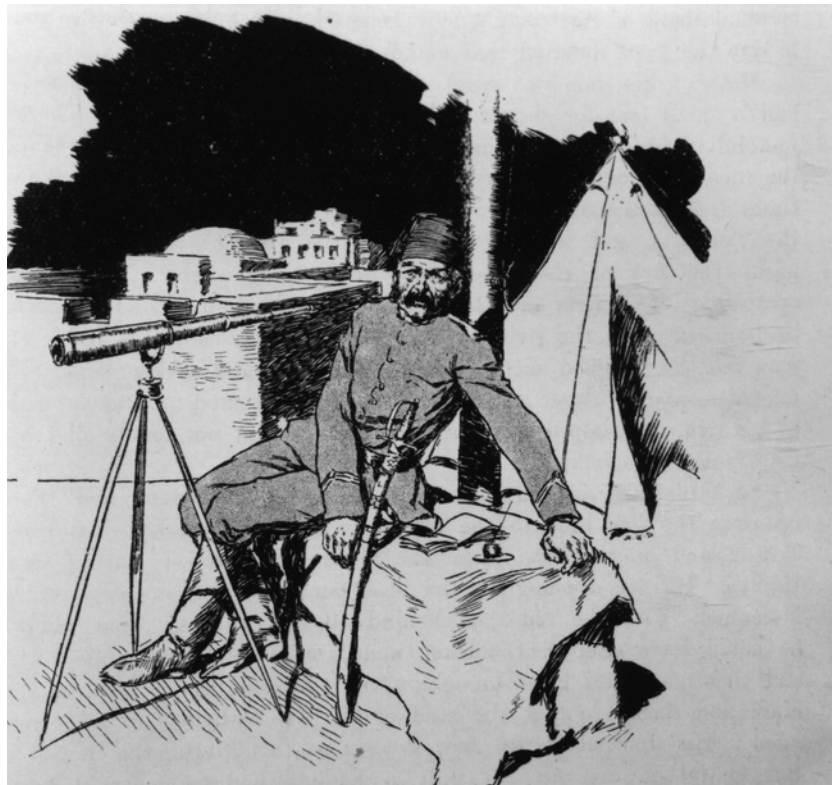
Gordon had arrived in Khartoum in February 1884. Despite his orders to evacuate Egyptian personnel he saw no way that was safe to do so, and he was determined not to surrender Khartoum easily to the Mahdi. Khartoum lay at the confluence of the White and Blue Niles and Gordon, by training a Royal Engineer, set about putting the city's defences in order. By this point, however, the Mahdi was largely triumphant across the Sudan and over the following months detachments of *ansar* were moved forward to surround the city – although it was not until the Mahdi himself, and the large force under his command, arrived in October that Khartoum was completely invested. Gordon's presence within the city inspired the garrison to defend their outposts and make occasional sorties against Mahdist positions, but despite his attempts to maintain a cohesive defensive perimeter many of the defences were dependent upon the barrier of the Nile, and by late 1884 the river level was falling and would soon be fordable in several places. Gordon was initially able to send messages up the Nile and in the early days he might easily have escaped, largely freeing Britain of the obligation to assist him; instead, he assured the Government in London that he did not intend to abandon his responsibilities and would share the fate of the garrison.

Gordon's predicament was an embarrassment to Prime Minister Gladstone, who was reluctant to commit British troops to any extended campaigning in the Sudan. Gordon's story had been taken up by newspapers in London, however, and had caught the imagination of the Victorian public. Gladstone had little choice other than to support Gordon or suffer the electoral consequences, and in August 1884 General Wolseley was appointed

to command an expedition to march to relieve Khartoum and extricate both Gordon and the surviving garrison and civilians.

Wolseley was a greatly experienced officer who was already by rights too senior for such a command, but while he undoubtedly remained ambitious, he also saw in the expedition a challenge in which he could excel. There were two ways into Khartoum from the outside – the easiest was a 250-mile overland caravan route from Suakin in the east. Despite some setbacks, however, 'Uthman Diqna's Bija still commanded the country inland from Suakin, and in any case the route was known to be short of wells along part of the journey, which could be crippling to a large force of men and animals.

Instead, Wolseley proposed to approach Khartoum down the length of the Nile. This was a much longer route – over 1,600 miles – but Wolseley had built much of his early reputation on a campaign in Canada in 1870 during which he had moved his troops along hundreds of miles of Canadian riverways, and he intended to draw on the same expertise. The geography of the Nile was problematic, however. Not only did its cataracts make it impassable at times but, 175 miles short of Khartoum, it took a sharp turn to the east, flowing away from Wolseley's objective before curving lazily back in the right direction. Even as he prepared for the expedition, commissioning the hasty construction of a flotilla of small boats and organizing for a detachment of Canadian river specialists – *Voyageurs* – to join him, Wolseley pondered the effect such a detour might have on his timing, and wondered how long Gordon might hold out. To hedge his bets he decided to split his forces at Korti, where the bend in the Nile started, and while half would proceed



Gordon looks forlornly from his palace rooftop in Khartoum for relief. A belief among the British public that Gordon had been cynically abandoned by the government underpinned the decision to send British troops to his relief. (Author's collection)

downriver a special flying column would take the most direct route, a shortcut across the desert to Metemmeh, upstream from Khartoum. Such a move would involve crossing a harsh stretch of inhospitable desert, but there were ancient wells along the way, and to ensure his troops could move faster than conventional infantry Wolseley ordered the formation of his elite Camel Corps, drawn largely from fit young volunteers from elite British cavalry regiments. As innovative and original as this idea was, it was undermined by the fact that few of the Camel Corps – who were always intended to fight on foot – were given training in infantry tactics, and by the fact that they were largely unfamiliar with the capabilities of their mounts.

Wolseley assembled his force, over 5,500 men, at Wadi Halfa, on the Egyptian/Sudanese border, by the end of October 1884, and it began its advance in a series of leapfrogs, hauling the boats out of the water to pass otherwise impassable stretches of the Nile. Progress was inevitably slow, however, and in mid-November a message smuggled out of Khartoum suggested that Gordon could only hold out for a further 40 days.

The advance parties of the expedition reached Korti in the middle of December and it was clear that Wolseley could not risk everything on sticking to the river route. Instead, he adopted the shortcut option, sending 2,400 men in the same fashion down the river, and directing his new Camel Corps to make a dash across the desert to Metemmeh where, he hoped, Gordon might push out to meet them.

Yet it could not be a dash. The 'Desert Column' numbered 1,600 men and included Gardner guns and light 'screw guns', with a train of 2,000 camels – arguably too few for the job, despite their numbers. The distance to Metemmeh could not be covered without at least the first set of wells – at Jakdul – being secured. It was decided that Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stewart, commanding the expedition, would lead an advance detachment to Jakdul, secure the wells and stockpile supplies there, return to Korti to collect the rest of his command, and then advance in earnest. It was not until 14 January 1885 that Stewart was able to set off from Jakdul on his advance to Metemmeh. With him went Colonel Frederick Burnaby, an officer in the Royal Horse Guards who had a public reputation for daring, and who had joined the expedition during a period of leave; men of Burnaby's own regiment, the Royal Horse Guards, were present in the Camel Corps, and he was a hugely popular figure among them.

All of these cumbersome preliminaries had, of course, been apparent to the Mahdi, who had concentrated additional forces at Khartoum, and he redoubled his efforts to capture the city.



Colonel Frederick Burnaby of the Royal Horse Guards, here depicted in full-dress uniform very different from the service dress worn in the Sudan, was a larger-than-life character who enjoyed exploring remote countries and volunteering for service during his periods of leave. Burnaby had volunteered to join the desert expedition, and would be killed at Abu Klea. (Ron Sheeley Collection)

1 c.1000hrs: Having stood-to in their overnight *zariba* (thorn-fence enclosure) at 0330hrs and unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the Mahdists to attack between 0700hrs and 0830hrs, Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stewart's forces leave the *zariba* and form square to advance upon the wells at Abu Klea.

2 c.1045hrs: As the British square, struggling to keep formation, follows the line of a stony rise overlooking a wide *khôr* (a dry gully) on its left, the British become aware of a Mahdist presence in the *khôr*.

3 c.1050hrs: Seeing the misalignment in the British lines, the Mahdists in the *khôr*, under the command of the *amir* Musa wad Hilu, emerge from concealment and prepare to attack the British square.

4 c.1050hrs: As the intention of the Mahdists in the *khôr* to attack becomes apparent, a Gardner gun detachment and three companies at the left rear of the square move out of alignment, apparently to secure better fields of fire.

5 c.1100hrs: The Mahdist force advances rapidly out of the *khôr*, deploying in at least three wedge-shaped groupings, following the line of shallow feeder *khôrs* to the wide *khôr* to give themselves some protection, and aiming for the disrupted sector of the British square.

6 c.1105hrs: Fire from the British square fails to halt the Mahdist attack, which overruns the Gardner gun and strikes the companies on either side, pushing them back into the square. Fierce close-quarter fighting rages, but the presence of baggage camels within the square disrupts the Mahdists' ability to attack other sides in the rear; the rear ranks of several companies turn about and fire on the Mahdists inside the square. By about 1115hrs the Mahdists have been driven out of the square and at 1120hrs they retreat reluctantly towards the *khôr*.

7 c.1300hrs: Having recovered the wounded and ensured the departure of the Mahdists, Stewart advances the square clear of the battlefield, re-forms, and moves towards the wells at Abu Klea.

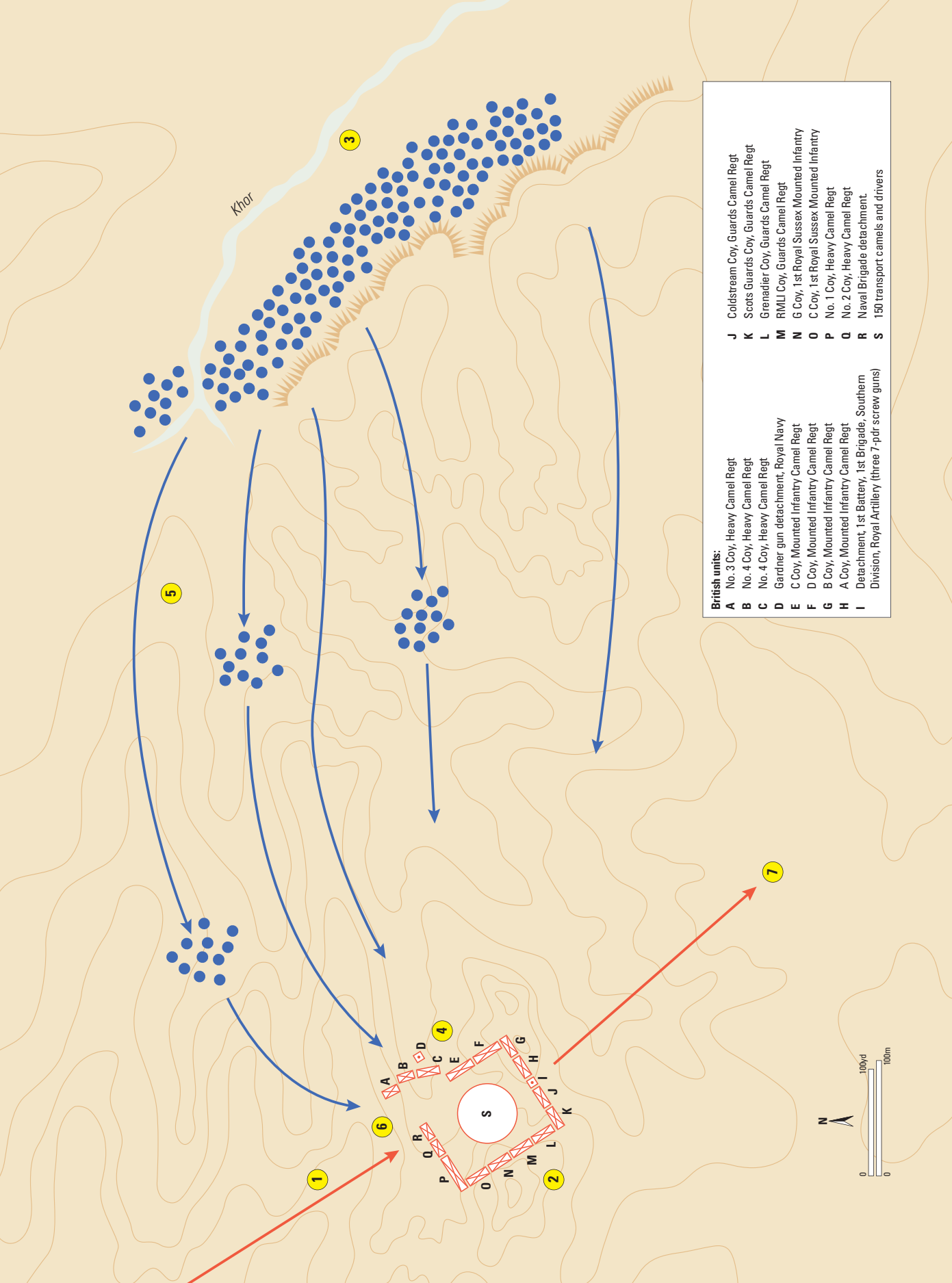
Battlefield environment

Stewart's advance across the open desert took him away from the more fertile banks of the Nile and through a hot, sand-blasted landscape almost entirely devoid of water and vegetation. The Desert Column carried its water and supplies with it, but it was still a strategic imperative for the British to secure the wells at Abu Klea, a series of muddy pools that traditionally sustained caravans making the crossing from Korti to Metemmeh. The night before the battle Stewart had bivouacked on a series of low, rocky ridges, and the presence of *jihadiyya* on the distant hills convinced him that the Mahdists would defend the wells.

The final approach to Abu Klea lay down an open valley, framed by low hills on either side, and marked by a *khôr* (a dry gully) running down the centre; only in the *khôr* was there a scattering of coarse grass. Elsewhere the sand showed pale in twisting hollows while the slopes were strewn with rocks and stones worn black with weathering. As he entered the valley Stewart had seen Mahdist banners at the far end and, seeking to maintain the best ground as he advanced, he steered a course along a low rise south of the *khôr*. In such

open terrain, however, even small folds or dips, carpeted as they were with stones, made progress for the British difficult. Stewart advanced with his force in a square in anticipation of an attack, but the subtle undulations in the unforgiving ground, the inexperience of many of his men in marching in such a formation and the presence of his unmanageable herd of baggage animals in the centre, made it difficult to maintain the integrity of the square.

By contrast, the Mahdist commanders were comfortable in their own environment, and were able to use the wide *khôr* to conceal much of their movements; when they finally attacked, the British were advancing across their front just a few hundred yards away. As soon as the Mahdists' presence was revealed British commanders jockeyed to find the best fields of fire, even in such open terrain, and the integrity of the square was disrupted. Although these movements were minor, they provided an opportunity for the Mahdists to launch a very rapid attack across a short distance of bare slope, an attack which – had the distance been greater – would have been unlikely to penetrate an established field of fire.



Khor

British units:

A	No. 3 Coy, Heavy Camel Regt	J	Coldstream Coy, Guards Camel Regt
B	No. 4 Coy, Heavy Camel Regt	K	Scots Guards Coy, Guards Camel Regt
C	No. 4 Coy, Heavy Camel Regt	L	Grenadier Coy, Guards Camel Regt
D	Gardner gun detachment, Royal Navy	M	RMLI Coy, Guards Camel Regt
E	C Coy, Mounted Infantry Camel Regt	N	G Coy, 1st Royal Sussex Mounted Infantry
F	D Coy, Mounted Infantry Camel Regt	O	C Coy, 1st Royal Sussex Mounted Infantry
G	B Coy, Mounted Infantry Camel Regt	P	No. 1 Coy, Heavy Camel Regt
H	A Coy, Mounted Infantry Camel Regt	Q	No. 2 Coy, Heavy Camel Regt
I	Detachment, 1st Battery, 1st Brigade, Southern Division, Royal Artillery (three 7-pdr screw guns)	R	Naval Brigade detachment
		S	150 transport camels and drivers



INTO COMBAT

Stewart's force set out from Jakdul in a long column of camels and dust on the afternoon of 14 January, screened by a single squadron of the 19th Hussars, the only cavalrymen still on their horses. The next day passed without incident, but on the day after that the Hussars ran into detachments of Mahdists at the head of a long, desolate valley running down towards the next set of wells, at Abu Klea. The *ansar* melted away and Stewart hurried his men forward in the hope that they might reach the wells that evening. It was by then late in the afternoon, however, and with signs of the Mahdists massing in the distance Stewart decided to halt for the night.

The column halted on a low gravel rise and the surrounding thorn-bush was cut down and reinforced with stones and baggage to form a protective *zariba* (thorn-fence enclosure) around the bivouac. As they did so a large party of Mahdists – apparently *jihadiyya* – occupied a further low hill some 1,300yd away and opened a steady, if inaccurate, fire. The fire ceased overnight, but began again the following morning, prompting the Royal Artillery detachment to come into action and shell the hillside. For a while it seemed that the Mahdists might be gathering for an attack and Stewart reinforced his defences in anticipation, but although a large body of *ansar* appeared further along the valley they retired instead towards the wells at Abu Klea. It was clear, however, that the Mahdists intended to defend the wells and Stewart decided to leave a strong detachment to defend his *zariba*, and to advance the rest towards Abu Klea. The attacking party formed up in a square in the lee of the ridge, sheltered from Mahdist fire and set off on foot, taking with them only 150 camels to carry ammunition, equipment and water, and in anticipation of evacuating casualties.

The square was formed with the three Royal Artillery screw guns in the centre of the front face with A Company, Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment, on their left and the Coldstream Company of the Guards Camel Regiment on their right. On the left of A Company were B Company, MICR, and adjoining them, starting the left face, were D then C companies of the same regiment. Then came No. 5 Company, Heavy Camel Regiment, and No. 4 Company, which turned the corner into the rear face. Nos 3, 2 and 1 companies made up the rest of the rear face, with a small Naval Brigade detachment in the middle, supported by a Gardner gun. Two companies of 1st Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment, began the right face with a company of the Royal Marine Light Infantry in the centre and the Grenadier and Scots Guards companies of the Guards Camel Regiment completing the formation. The transport camels were inside the square.

As soon as the square moved into the open it came under fire from the *jihadiyya* on the distant hills. Manoeuvring the square was a cumbersome operation at the best of times, and Stewart halted briefly to reposition some of his men to even out the sides. Stewart advanced slowly into the valley, a strange landscape of exposed sand and stones weathered almost black, heading towards a line of Mahdist banners that could be seen in the far distance. After a while he shifted his advance slightly, up onto an undulating ridge to his right, aiming to bypass the apparent Mahdist position and provoke them to an attack. The 19th Hussars were providing support outside the square and



became engaged in a long-range firefight that drew them away from the line of advance. All the while the square was being fired upon by distant *jihadiyya*, and Stewart sent skirmishers out to his front and flanks to prevent them coming close. The square was now on rising ground advancing parallel to a wide *khor* (a dry gully) about 450yd away to the left, and by this time it was getting difficult to maintain strict cohesion. The uneven pace of the camels had led to the rear face of the square bulging, and a cloud of dust thrown up by the advance made it difficult to see clearly on all sides.

Their discomfort was immediately obvious to the Mahdist commander, the *amir* Musa wad Hilu, who had moved his men into the cover of the *khor* waiting for just such a moment. British estimates of his command varied between 3,000 and 5,000 men, but they certainly appeared to be in two distinct formations, one apparently composed of Ja'liyin Arabs from the Metemmeh district who were wearing a version of the Mahdi's uniform, and the other desert-dwellers, sent from Omdurman, wearing the ordinary *tobe*. With a sudden shout they sprang up from the *khor* and rushed up the slope in at least three wedge-shaped groupings, led by mounted *amirs*.

Seeing them advance, Stewart's skirmishers scurried back towards the protection of the square. Several officers in the front face, seeing that they were about 30yd short of a rise ahead, urged their men forward to seize it before the Mahdists. The sudden movement lurched down the square, compounding the confusion caused by the camels at the rear, and part of the formation became unhinged. The Gardner gun detachment, commanded by Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN, hurried out through the lines of troops to take up a position facing the Mahdists but outside the square. Perhaps to cover the Gardner crew, one of the detachments in the rear face moved out of line and swung to face the attack, and Colonel Burnaby, seeing the risk, ordered another to fall in beside them. The left rear of the square was now open and exposed just minutes before the *ansar* hit it.

The artist and war correspondent Melton Prior made this sketch of the *zariba* at the head of the Abu Klea valley on the morning of 17 January 1885. The hills from which the *jihadiyya* had harassed the position are on the left, and the casualties they inflicted on the right; just visible in the distance is Stewart's square, advancing towards the wells – and battle. (Author's collection)





The Mahdist attack at Abu Klea

At the start of the battle of Abu Klea, the Mahdists launch a determined attack on the British square from the cover of a shallow gully. On the right are a detachment of *ansar* wearing the traditional robes of many of the Sudanese Arab groups, and carrying the swords and spears that were the mainstay of Mahdist shock-troops; the man in the foreground is carrying a hide shield of the type used by some of the Nile tribes. They are led by a mounted *amir* and his standard-bearer; the standard is typical of Mahdist banners, bearing an inscription extolling the Mahdi's place as the successor to the Prophet Mohammed. To the left are a group wearing one of the early forms of the *jibbeh*, the robe the Mahdi prescribed for his

followers; this early pattern was sleeveless and decorated with limited colour patches and edging. The Mahdist success will depend on them crossing the open ground in the face of British fire; ahead of them the Naval Brigade Gardner gun has been deployed in a dangerously exposed position, forward of the British lines, while behind it, to the right, the poorly placed British units at the rear of the square try to manoeuvre into position. On his own, mounted and wearing blue, is Colonel Frederick Burnaby, attempting to direct the defence; the British have not yet opened fire, and within minutes the *ansar* attack will overrun the Gardner gun, and Burnaby will be attacked, dismounted and mortally wounded.

The Mahdist charge was made with their usual dash. Calling out in the name of Allah they ran towards the front and left of the square but veered to their right as they came under heavy fire from the guns of the still-formed British front – under the impact of close-quarter volleys they reminded one soldier of grass, thrown in the air by a lawnmower. Veering away from this fire they headed instead towards the units manoeuvring in the open to their right. The slope was completely devoid of cover, however, and in crossing those few hundred yards they were shot down in their hundreds. In front of them, the Gardner gun jammed after firing no more than 40 rounds; worse still, the gun's presence ahead of the line hampered the fire of the men behind it. Realizing the danger, Burnaby rode out ahead of the men, ordering the companies to fall back into their proper positions. It was too late for the crew of the Gardner, however, and for Burnaby himself.

Beresford somehow survived, pushed out of the fighting by the struggling mass of *ansar* who reached the square, but the rest of his Gardner gun crew were cut down just yards from the gun itself. Burnaby found himself surrounded, cutting and parrying with his sword. Facing an *ansar* jabbing at him with a spear from the front he was struck from behind and, turning, was caught by a spear-thrust in the throat that knocked him out of the saddle. Despite his serious wounds he managed to stagger briefly to his feet, still wielding his sword, until the crush of *ansar* brought him down.

Sweeping over Burnaby and the Gardner gun the leading *ansar* struck the square in a fierce flurry of hand-to-hand fighting, disrupting those companies that were out of place and pushing another back on the baggage camels in the centre. Fortunately for the British, despite their inexperience of infantry tactics – which may have contributed to the confusion in the first place – the men held their ground, pouring in steady volleys at close range. When a party of Mahdist horsemen suddenly appeared and rushed for the opening a single volley brought down most of their horses.

Nevertheless, the leading *ansar* had by now forced an opening into the square. Here, however, they faced the same confusion of baggage camels that

had earlier disrupted the British movements. Some *ansar* tried to duck under the camels' bellies while others simply cut them down; the delay, however, allowed a few precious minutes for the British companies at the front of the square to turn their rear face inwards to face them, and those *ansar* that emerged from the tangle of animals were quickly shot down. Even so, one group reached Stewart, who had been mounted behind the front face with his staff. Stewart's horse was cut down, and his staff had had to rally to his defence. An officer with the Camel Corps, Lieutenant Percy Marling, reported that he had to turn his rear rank about, so his men could fight back to back; after ten minutes of desperate action Marling's men successfully beat off their assailants, killing any *ansar* who entered the square (Emery 1986: 144). Marling reported that one of his sergeants nearly shot him; indeed, it is likely that some of the fire directed at the *ansar* within the square went on to strike troops still struggling at the rear, where the hand-to-hand fighting remained intense. After the battle it was reported that in the ferocity of the fighting a number of Martini-Henry rifles had jammed, and a few of the



This typically stirring Victorian rendition depicts the moment the *ansar* struck the disrupted British square. (Author's collection)

Harry Etherington

Harry Etherington offered little information on his background and decision to join the British Army, although like many in the ranks he was probably motivated by the depressed state of the British economy in the 1870s. He had been stationed with his unit, 1st Battalion, the Royal Sussex Regiment, for two years in Malta when requests came for volunteers to join the Gordon Relief Expedition and Harry, together with many others, applied in the hope of a change from the monotony of garrison life and for the possibility of promotion. The draft was shipped to Cairo and then down the Nile, being the only infantry contingent in the elite Camel Corps.

Harry thought the camels diseased, smelly and infested with maggots but, despite some mishaps – including being carried away by a panicked camel, and deposited in the desert – he managed to learn to ride one. He spent the night before Abu Klea under fire in

the British *zariba* and found the experience of being shot at in the dark unsettling; nevertheless, he was with the 1st Royal Sussex detachment in the right rear of the square when it was attacked at Abu Klea the following morning, and remembered vividly the destruction inflicted on the *ansar* by British volleys, and the confused fighting inside the square.

After the battle Etherington was left with a company guarding the wounded, and remained there for two months, sleeping on the bare sand, until the general British withdrawal. Back at Korti the battalion camped for two months and many, like Harry, expected to be sent back to Khartoum to avenge Gordon, but instead the order came to return to Britain. What happened to Harry Etherington after that remains obscure – no doubt he remained in the Army until his time of service expired, and, like the majority of ordinary Victorian soldiers, passed anonymously back into civilian life.

sword bayonets, which turned out to have been poorly made, bent almost double under use.

Yet the decisive moment had already passed for the Mahdists. The companies to the left front of the square were still volleying steadily into *ansar* supports coming up the slope, and the leading detachments had been blunted inside the square. Every moment the Mahdists tried to hold their position caused them further casualties, and at last they began to withdraw,



'Abd-al-Rahman wad al-Najumi

Detailed information on the ordinary individuals who supported the Mahdiyya is scarce, even concerning *amirs* such as Ali-wad-Saad, who led the Ja'liyin contingent at Abu Klea, and was killed there. A little is known, however, about Ali-wad-Saad's fellow Ja'liyin, 'Abd-al-Rahman wad al-Najumi, who was born on the Nile in about 1847 and who adopted the life of a religious ascetic. A strong advocate of Islamic practice, al-Najumi was attracted by both the Mahdi's religious and nationalist message, and travelled to the Kordofan to join the movement. He displayed a military flair in the early clashes with the Egyptian Army and soon became part of the Mahdi's inner circle, and is credited with a decisive role in the defeat of Hicks at Shaikan.

Al-Najumi was then placed in command of the main Mahdist concentration opposite Khartoum and, although this prevented his involvement in fighting the Gordon Relief Expedition, he was largely responsible for the capture of Khartoum. Following the death of the Mahdi, al-Najumi was marginalized by the Khalifa Abdullahi; he was made governor of Dongola, perhaps to remove him from the centre of power at Omdurman, and

instructed to invade Egypt in 1889. The march through the desert to the border reduced the effectiveness of his forces, however, and al-Najumi was attacked by an Anglo-Egyptian force at Toski on 3 August. Despite being outnumbered, al-Najumi personally led the *ansar* attack on horseback and was wounded in the chest. He continued to direct the battle until the *ansar* began to retire at which point, disdaining to flee, he rode forward to try to rally his men but was wounded a second time. His bodyguard attempted to carry him away on a camel but they were intercepted by Egyptian cavalry and, in the fierce fighting that followed, al-Najumi was shot again and killed.

Although his talents as a tactician may have been exceptional, in battle al-Najumi embodied the leadership qualities of dozens of otherwise forgotten Mahdist commanders who, inspired by their faith and their cause, led from the front, often at great personal risk, particularly during the ascendancy of the Mahdiyya in battles such as Abu Klea and Tofrek, and who remained prepared to do the same again in the 1890s, despite the even greater risks involved.

running at an easy pace back down the slope. One old Mahdist leader on horseback – perhaps Musa wad Hilu himself – rode calmly into the square towards the end, planted his banner, and began declaiming verses from the Koran before he was killed.

As the *ansar* withdrew the British allowed themselves a cheer and many of the *ansar* were seen to pause and look back at their enemy with disdain before a sudden quiet fell over the battlefield – a stark contrast to the noise of a few moments before – broken only by the groaning of the wounded. The Mahdists might have been ripe for a determined pursuit, but the 19th Hussars had been too far away to join in the action, and Stewart let his enemy withdraw without further harassment.

Stewart moved his square forwards 200yd and re-formed it, sending men back to look for the wounded. The dead lay where they had fallen, British and *ansar* together, and the toll had been heavy – nine officers and 65 other ranks had been killed and a further nine and 85 wounded, many of them badly cut by Mahdist swords. Burnaby was found where he fell, still alive, but bleeding heavily from his wounds, and to the dismay of the men he died a few minutes later. The British wounded were dragged out from the carnage to be tended, but there was no help for the Mahdist wounded, many of whom remained a threat despite serious wounds. Estimates of the Mahdist dead numbered 1,100 men, more than one-quarter of the number engaged, and their bodies lay spread out over the rise in the hot sun.

The battle had certainly been a close call. Despite being heavily outgunned at Abu Klea the Mahdists launched such a fierce attack that, in a matter

OPPOSITE

'The Battle of Abu Klea' by William Barnes Wollen (1857–1936). The British public enjoyed representations of their soldiers standing firm in the face of ferocious onslaughts, and Wollen has certainly captured the moment; however, he has inaccurately shown the *ansar* as Bija from the eastern Sudan. (Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)



This vivid depiction shows the death of Colonel Frederick Burnaby. The artist correctly shows Burnaby surrounded by *ansar* and speared from front and behind, but in fact he was wearing a blue patrol jacket on the day, rather than the khaki implied here. (Author's collection)

of minutes, they had taken advantage of confused British manoeuvring and had managed to penetrate the square – only the steadiness of the British troops prevented it from being completely overwhelmed. Although Abu Klea was undoubtedly a British victory, many considered it a disaster because of the heavy losses, and the advisability of mixing men from various cavalry regiments, who had not yet learned to fight together and who were poorly trained in infantry tactics, was largely held to blame.

Nevertheless, Stewart was able to resume his march and to secure the shallow waterholes that constituted the wells at Abu Klea. Here he left his wounded under a strong guard and pressed on, hoping to

reach Metemmeh that night. In fact it was not until the morning of the 19th that the column drew close to the Nile, only to discover that the Mahdists had rallied along the riverbanks between the village of Abu Kru and Metemmeh itself. Here Stewart formed his men into another defensive *zariba* and they promptly came under the same heavy fire from the *jihadiyya* that had served as a prelude to Abu Klea. Stewart himself climbed on a rock and was observing the enemy when he was shot in the groin, a wound that would soon kill him. Stewart handed over command to Brigadier-General Sir Charles Wilson, but urged him to wait to see if the *ansar* would again attack.

The *zariba* spent much of the day under a galling fire before Wilson decided that no attack was forthcoming, and ordered most of his men to march out in a square, as Stewart had done two days previously. The square was subjected to the same heavy fire as it advanced and as it drew near Metemmeh a body of 2,000 Mahdists suddenly rushed out to attack it. They had a greater distance to cover in the open than at Abu Klea, however, and steady British volleying brought them to a halt before they could charge home.

Wisely, Wilson decided not to force Metemmeh, instead establishing a camp at the nearby village of Gubat, on the banks of the river. The River Column had established its main objective, to shortcut the great bend in the Nile, but Khartoum still lay 100 miles away, Gordon's fate was unclear, and the column was suffering from both the exhaustion of its men and, more importantly, its camels.

Two days later, four of Gordon's river steamers, which had been cruising the Nile for several weeks searching for relief, arrived. The news was not encouraging – Khartoum was at the end of its tether – and it was already out of date. It was impossible to make a dash for the city with the entire column, so Wilson instead decided on a token gesture, sending a handful of British

This depiction of the Mahdist attack at Abu Klea was drawn by an eyewitness, Captain Willoughby Verner. It shows a detachment of *ansar* wearing an early version of the Mahdi's prescribed uniform, with small patches on the breast of the *jibbeh* rather than the more ornate patterns used subsequently. (Author's collection)





Melton Prior made this sketch of the confused hand-to-hand fighting as the *ansar* pushed into the square; note the more accurate representation of *ansar* dress. (Author's collection)

troops and the Egyptian crews downriver as proof that help was at hand. Even at the last minute, however, there were delays as Wilson probed for Mahdist troops said to be heading for Gubat.

When the river steamers did set off they ran the gauntlet of the Nile itself, running into rocks and sandbanks that had risen nearer the surface as the water-level dropped, and, as they approached the city, of Mahdist fire from the riverbanks. On the morning of 28 January 1885 they came close enough to see that there was no longer an Egyptian flag flying over the Governor's palace – Gordon's headquarters throughout the siege – and the grim realization dawned that Khartoum had fallen. The river steamers turned about and embarked on what would prove to be an equally perilous journey back to Gubat.

In fact, Khartoum had fallen two days earlier on 26 January. That morning the Mahdi had mounted a fierce attack around the perimeter and the *ansar* had carried the defences. Gordon himself had been killed as the Governor's palace was stormed, and most of the garrison died with him. The city was given over to the victorious Mahdists, who slaughtered troops and civilians loyal to the Egyptian administration alike.

The idea that relief had arrived 'two days' late' was enshrined in the mythology of Gordon and the Empire, but the truth was rather different; just a handful of British troops were present on the river steamers, and their practical value to Gordon would have been negligible. The Desert Column



had been able to advance no closer than Gubat, while the rest of Wolseley's force was still navigating the great bend in the Nile.

The expedition had failed, and once the news of Khartoum's fall became known Wolseley ordered his men to retire disconsolately to Egypt.

Gordon's Egyptian garrison were overwhelmed at Khartoum at first light on 26 January 1885. (Author's collection)

Tofrek

22 March 1885

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

With the despatch of Gordon to Khartoum at the beginning of 1884 the Government in London hoped to extricate itself from the Sudanese entanglement with the minimum of fuss. While both London and Cairo were prepared to abandon Khartoum to the Mahdi, however, there was rather more concern about the future of Suakin, the port on the Red Sea coast that offered the best strategic access to the Sudan from the outside world. While the Egyptians held Suakin, however, the inland hills beyond were commanded by 'Uthman Diqna and the Bija.

The solution was to send another ex-British officer, Lieutenant-General Valentine Baker, to Suakin to galvanize the Egyptian garrison and suppress 'Uthman Diqna. Baker had once been a colonel in the fashionable 10th Hussars, but had fallen from grace after a curious incident involving a lady in a railway carriage, and had left the British Army to seek service with the Turkish Sultan. Following the British dominance of Egyptian affairs after Tel-El-Kebir he had been appointed to the command of the Egyptian Gendamerie and in late 1883 he was ordered to secure Suakin. He arrived to find the situation deteriorating – the Egyptian garrisons were confined to the port and the outlying settlements at Sinkat and Torkar were under siege by the Mahdists. Baker re-organized his available forces and in January shipped them a few miles down the coast and set out inland towards Torkar. He had only gone a few miles when he was attacked by a large Mahdist force near El Teb on 4 February and his army fell apart. Baker himself was wounded in the face and was led away by his staff but over 2,000 of his officers and men were killed.

The effect of Baker's disaster was to provoke the British Government to send some material support to Suakin at last. Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald



Graham was sent there with a force of British regulars garnered from the garrisons in Egypt or diverted en route from India. On 29 February Graham dispersed the Mahdists concentrations around Torkar at a hard-fought second battle at El Teb, fought almost within sight of the desiccated bodies still lying at the scene of Baker's disaster. Graham then turned his attention to the heart of the rebellion, determined to disperse the main concentrations of Bija under 'Uthman Diqna himself between the villages of Tamai and Tamanieb, 14 miles south-west of Suakin itself. On 13 March Graham attacked Tamai in two brigade squares, but a mishandling of the advance caused gaps in the formation, which the Bija attacked with great ferocity. In the end the squares held and the Bija suffered a serious defeat, but Graham's own casualties numbered over 100 dead and a similar number wounded.

For all the cost Tamai had badly disrupted 'Uthman Diqna's hold over the hinterland around Suakin and accorded the British the chance to secure the area permanently; but with Gordon then in Khartoum, the Gladstone administration was determined not to commit any more resources to the Sudan and instead ordered Graham to withdraw, leaving Suakin once again to the Egyptians. It was a move that spared 'Uthman Diqna the indignity of a final defeat, and instead allowed him to regroup and rebuild his influence among the Bija. A year later, however, with Wolseley struggling desperately to relieve Khartoum, the British Government again decided that Suakin's strategic importance was too important to be ignored, and Graham was sent back there with a fresh expeditionary force composed of both British and Indian troops. By the time he returned the situation had largely reverted to the way it had been before the British victories at El Teb and Tamai.

The arrival of fresh British troops prompted 'Uthman Diqna to probe their weaknesses, launching a series of minor night attacks on outposts and harassing patrols. The Bija had changed their appearance during the previous year, abandoning their traditional robes and adopting the Mahdi's uniform, shaving off their long hair and wearing a skullcap together with a *jibbeh* decorated according to regional taste, with bright geometric patterns rather than the oblong patches favoured along the Nile. Diqna's headquarters remained at Tamanieb, but Graham determined that the village of Hashin, much nearer Suakin, was being used as a staging post for these attacks. On 20 March 1885, Graham led a strong force that drove the *ansar* out of Hashin and across the hills beyond; having secured the country in between, he decided next to attack Tamanieb directly.

This unusually fine Sudanese *kaskara* (sword) has a silvered hilt and double pommel; the double-edged blade is 34.5in long. Some surviving examples display fine workmanship, sometimes with Islamic phrases etched into the blade. The *kaskara* was carried in a red leather scabbard with a distinctive flared end, and was usually worn under the left arm with the strap over the shoulder. (© Royal Armouries XXVIS.166)

1 c.1230hrs: British troops under the command of Major-General Sir John McNeill arrive at a point between Suakin and Tamai and halt in a clearing amid the thorn-bush with the intention of forming a supply depot.

2 c.1300hrs: Construction of a series of protective *zaribas* is begun within the clearing. Small sandbag redoubts are also begun at opposing corners to shelter machine-gun detachments. Owing to the thickness of the thorn-bush on the northern side of the position, construction of the *zaribas* progresses more quickly there.

3 c.1330hrs: Infantry picquets are placed in the thorn-bush to watch for the enemy; small cavalry vedettes are placed beyond these. As the construction of the *zaribas* requires more thorn-bush, some Royal Engineers and infantry are allowed unarmed into the bush to collect it. Although some stores are unloaded in the centre of the *zariba* the enclosures remain incomplete and many transport camels and mules remain in the open.

4 c.1445hrs: Some 5,000 Mahdist Bija emerge from the bush to the south-west of the *zariba*, scattering the British vedettes, pickets and work parties before them, and advancing very rapidly towards the *zariba*.

5 c.1450hrs: The Mahdists drive in picquets upon six companies of the 17th Bengal Native Infantry formed outside the *zariba*; most of the Indian soldiers break and are driven into the British position.

6 c.1455hrs: The Mahdists strike the large pool of transport camels and mules, which are protected only by their civilian drivers, stampeding them towards the incomplete *zaribas*. Mixing with the animals, the Bija penetrate the British centre.

7 c.1455hrs: Following the fleeing soldiers of the 17th Bengal Native Infantry, the Bija rush into the centre of the

British position. So fierce is their attack that they also overrun the southern *zariba*.

8 c.1500hrs: The Gardner gun in the sandbag redoubt is overrun; the companies of 1st Battalion, The Princess Charlotte of Wales's (Berkshire Regiment), defending it abandon the thorn-bush barricades, but re-form on the northernmost length and rake the interior of the enclosure with musketry, checking the Mahdist assault.

9 c.1500hrs: Four companies of the 1st Berkshire placed outside the *zariba* to protect the transport camels and mules form square, firing heavily at the Bija.

10 c.1445–1515hrs: Companies of the 15th Bengal Native Infantry maintain the integrity of their line and prevent the Mahdists from reaching the *zariba* on the western side.

11 c.1505hrs: The northern *zariba*, the most complete at the time of the attack and having received the earliest warning of the assault, is better able to defend itself; nevertheless, several Bija penetrate the position before being killed.

12 c.1505hrs: Members of the 17th Bengal Native Infantry, together with picquets and work parties who had fled the initial attack, take advantage of the disruption caused to the Bija by the cache of stores in the centre of the position to rally, and begin firing to clear the position.

13 c.1510hrs: The troops of the 1st Berkshire form square and retire into the *zariba*, firing as they go, eventually joining the men from their battalion who had defended the southern *zariba*. This concentration of British forces largely drives out those Mahdists who have penetrated the position, and at about 1515hrs the Bija withdraw. Some linger in the bush, looking for an opportunity to attack, but the British consolidate their position. No further attack develops and by 1615hrs the last Bija have withdrawn and the battle is over.

Battlefield environment

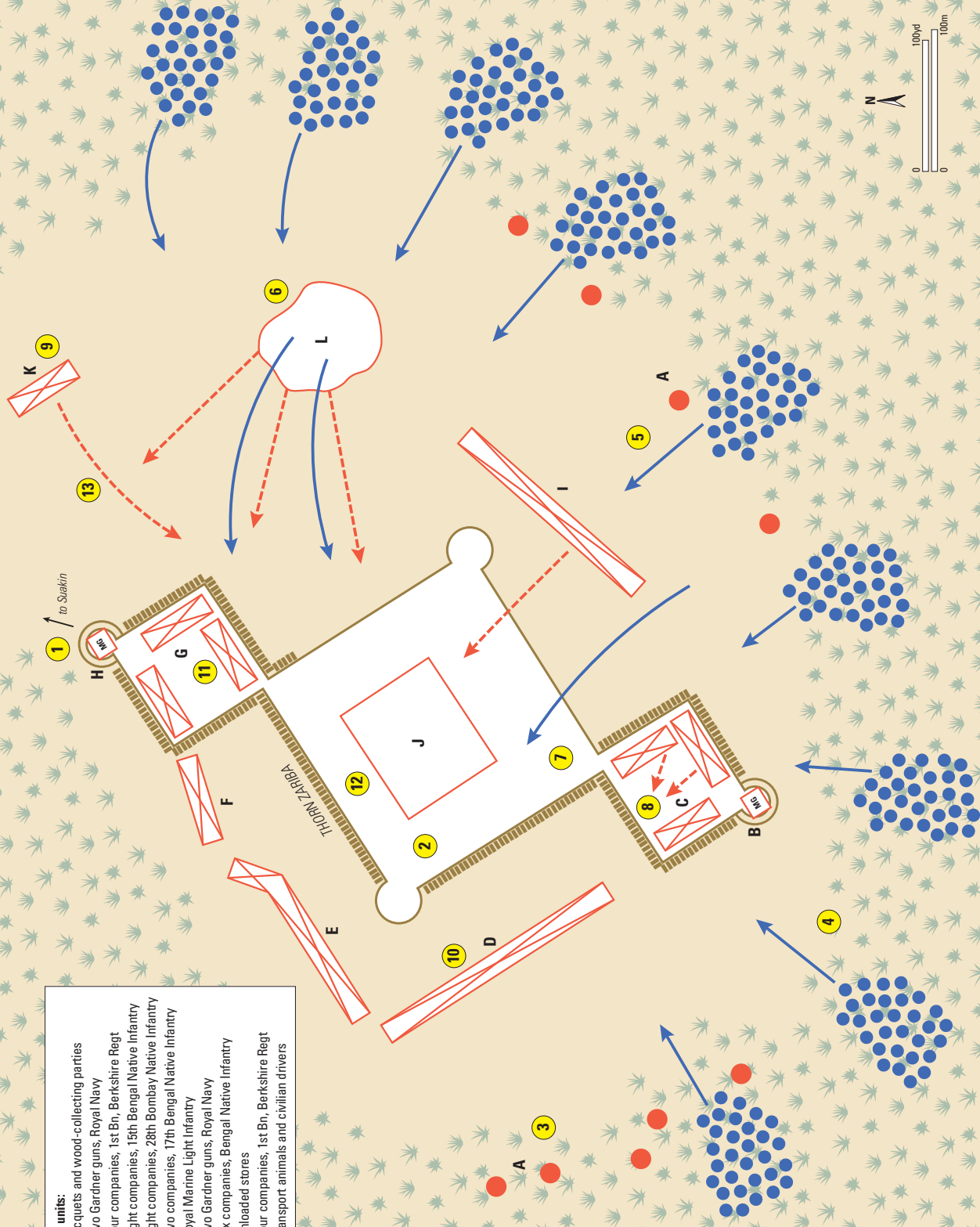
The countryside between the inland hills west of the Red Sea coast and the port of Suakin was well-trodden by 1885, and not merely along established tracks that led from the Bija heartlands to the sea. The country extending from the coast was arid semi-desert, scattered with thorn-bush and studded with rocky hills.

Both Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald Graham and his subordinate, Major-General Sir John McNeill, had previous experience of the terrain and knew the route to the Bija encampments at Tamai and Tamanieb; although the distance from Suakin was not insurmountable it was considered too far to advance without a staging post because of the lack of water. An old *zariba* erected during previous expeditions lay along the track and was probably still serviceable, but the proximity of the El Teb battlefield probably decided Graham to adopt a different approach. Instead, he directed McNeill to find a new route a

little further south. This passed through a belt of thick mimosa thorn-bush, which severely tested McNeill's advance. It proved difficult to keep the baggage animals together in the bush, which both delayed the advance and forced the troops to extend their column to protect them.

Although the countryside was largely flat, with no close hills or gullies, the lack of elevation made visibility difficult, a situation compounded for the British by an inadequate cavalry presence. In the end the thorn-bush dictated McNeill's choice of a place to establish his halfway depot, and he halted his advance in a clearing, which at least allowed him some immediate visibility and room to assemble. It was, however, impossible to scout the position adequately, although parties passing to and from on the track to Suakin had caught glimpses of parties of Bija, exposed in more open country.

- British units:**
- A Picquets and wood-collecting parties
 - B Two Gardner guns, Royal Navy
 - C Four companies, 1st Bn, Berkshire Regt
 - D Eight companies, 15th Bengal Native Infantry
 - E Eight companies, 28th Bombay Native Infantry
 - F Two companies, 17th Bengal Native Infantry
 - G Royal Marine Light Infantry
 - H Two Gardner guns, Royal Navy
 - I Six companies, Bengal Native Infantry
 - J Unloaded stores
 - K Four companies, 1st Bn, Berkshire Regt
 - L Transport animals and civilian drivers



INTO COMBAT

Graham knew the route to Tamanieb, but the distance was too great for the journey to be made in one go. Instead, he decided to establish a supply depot 8 miles from Suakin – roughly halfway – which he could use as a jumping-off point for an assault. The task was given to Major-General Sir John McNeill, who commanded Graham's 2nd Brigade, and the force consisted of 1st Battalion, The Princess Charlotte of Wales's (Berkshire Regiment), 600 men of the Royal Marine Light Infantry, Brigadier-General John Hudson's Indian Brigade (the 15th and 17th Bengal Native Infantry and the 28th Bombay Native Infantry), a squadron of the 5th Irish Lancers, a company of Royal Engineers and a company of the Madras Sappers and Miners. Two mule-drawn Gardner guns with Royal Navy crews were also attached to McNeill's command. The plan was to advance the force to an appropriate spot where supplies would be stockpiled and guarded by two battalions of infantry; Hudson and his Indian Brigade would then march back to Suakin, stopping halfway (4 miles from Suakin) to build another, smaller depot. Graham would then be in position to advance on Tamanieb in easy stages.

McNeill set out on 22 March, just two days after Hashin, and his force was accompanied by as many as 1,500 transport camels and mules managed by 500 Indian and Sudanese drivers. There was a well-used track for much of the way, but Graham – who accompanied the expedition for the first 2 miles before returning to Suakin – decided not to use it, instead pursuing a more direct route to the south. While the old route had followed a line of open desert, the shortcut blundered through thick patches of head-high mimosa thorn-bush. McNeill's brigade led the way in square in case of a surprise attack, with Hudson in the rear to protect the camels. It soon became difficult, however, to lead the camels evenly through the clearings in the scrub and the rear of the column started to straggle badly as Hudson deployed some of his men to protect the sprawling baggage train.

The column was about 6 miles out from Suakin when it came across a clearing in the scrub. McNeill called a halt to allow Hudson to close up and a field telegraph the expedition had brought with them was used to send a report back to Graham. Graham agreed that 6 miles would work for a depot, and once it was complete Hudson was ordered to return to Suakin without bothering to establish the second depot. McNeill decided to stay where he was and ordered his men to extend the clearing by cutting down the scrub and using the thorn-bushes to make a protected *zariba*. The plan was to construct three diagonally echeloned enclosures, with a large central one that would serve to house the current stores and contain any further supplies brought up for the attack on Tamanieb. The adjoining squares at either end were rather smaller – each about 70yd square – and intended as defensive bastions, the forward point of each containing a small redoubt made of sandbags to protect the machine guns. The redoubts, at least, would be partially entrenched, and the *zaribas* would be protected by a dense fence of thorn-bush.

McNeill's men were already at work by the time Hudson's Indian Brigade finally arrived. McNeill had allocated the southern *zariba* to the 1st Berkshire and the northern one to the RMLI, but while men lined the perimeter others had started to cut down and collect thorn-bush. It was a hot day and many had removed their jackets and piled their arms, draping their ammunition

OPPOSITE

The .450 Martini-Henry single-shot, breech-loading rifle – a Mk II is shown here – was the standard infantry arm of the British Army at the time of the first British intervention in the Sudan. (© Royal Armouries XII.446)

belts over the stands of rifles. Hudson deployed his Indian Brigade infantry battalions to the north and west in lines that formed square around the progressing *zaribas*. A series of four-man picquets were placed 150yd in front of the lines with a line of Lancer vedettes at about 1,000yd. Under normal circumstances these precautions would have provided ample warning of any approach, but in fact the thickness of the scrub rendered them largely irrelevant. Six companies of the 17th Bengal Native Infantry were similarly deployed in a line to the south, but the rear of the greater square was left open to allow the baggage animals to be gathered in the gap.

Around lunchtime a squadron of the 20th Hussars arrived from Suakin to carry news of McNeill's progress back to Graham and the horsemen reported that they had seen bodies of Bija moving about at a distance on the plain. Indeed, a report had reached Graham the night before that 'Uthman Diqna intended to attack the expedition long before it reached Tamai, and even suggested the attack might take place before the British could complete their *zariba*; this report had not apparently been passed on to McNeill. At about 1400hrs the corner redoubts were judged to be complete and the Gardner guns put in position, but only parts of the thorn-bush *zariba* were finished. The RMLI personnel occupied their square, but the men of the 1st Berkshire had not eaten since the expedition set off and their commander was instructed to let them eat by half-battalion, then move them into the defences when they had done so. Four companies did so and moved within the enclosure although, as the day was getting on, many were ordered to help with gathering more wood. The remainder of the battalion waited in a square near the great herd of transport animals. It was now about 1500hrs and McNeill was getting restless at the delay in sending Hudson's men back to Suakin when a lancer rode in suddenly from the vedettes to report that the Bija were gathering off to the west. The scrub cut off any view of this activity, but McNeill gave the order to stand-to; the men hardly had time to react before the remaining lancer vedettes and the Indian picquets came hurrying in.

The Bija were hard on their heels, about 5,000 men of the Hadandawa, Beni Amer and Amarar sections, now resplendent in the white robes of the *ansar*. The information received the night before by Graham was substantially correct, and 'Uthman Diqna had indeed not waited for the British to reach him; the dense scrub around the post had allowed him to approach the British position largely unseen.

The Bija emerged at a flat run from the bush in loose knots of 20 or 30 men, aiming primarily at the south-western corner. Some picquets from the 17th Bengal Native Infantry did not retire quickly enough and were overrun and killed, while some of the lancers crashed through the lines ahead of them, disrupting the formations. The 17th Bengal Native Infantry fired a volley, but the range was too close to slow the Bija in the enthusiasm of the moment; while the regiment's British officers held their ground, and the two companies nearest the 1st Berkshire square fell back towards them, the remaining four companies fled. The officers were quickly cut down and the Bija got among the fleeing Indians, slashing at them with their swords as the mixed mass fell back in confusion through the central enclosure.

Further to the right some Bija reached the baggage camels, stampeding some towards the enclosures and others away to the north, cutting at the







Tofrek, 22 March 1885



British view: We see the start of the battle, with the British taken by surprise by the sudden Bija attack. In the centre men of the 1st Berkshire, who have been making the thorn-bush *zariba* visible behind them, scramble to gather their stacked arms and come into action. Among the stacked arms are boxes containing Martini-Henry ammunition. The Bija attack, which had approached largely unnoticed through the surrounding thorn-bush, is already at the *zariba*, while to the left a picquet of the 17th Bengal Native Infantry – caught forward of

the British lines – is driven in, followed by baggage mules and camels from the British column. The Bija were able to stampede the baggage animals into the British lines, disrupting British formations and screening their attack. The attack is already throwing up a cloud of dust and smoke that will shortly envelope the battlefield, and within minutes the Bija will rush past the soldiers of the 1st Berkshire on the left, and into the British position; the outcome of the battle will depend on the ability of the Berkshires and others to hold their ground.



Mahdist view: The Mahdists rush forward through the mimosa thorn-scrub, driving those British elements caught outside the *zariba* before them; in the centre lies a dead picquet of the 17th Bengal Native Infantry, killed before he could reach the *zariba*, while terrified baggage camels stampede out of the way. Beyond the attackers is the partially completed thorn barricade built by the British, and on the other side soldiers of the 1st Berkshire are hastily forming up and opening fire. Most Bija carried traditional swords and spears, and some retained

their circular shields; by this stage in the war, however, numbers were also equipped with Egyptian Remington rifles, captured during the battles of the previous year. The banner on the left, proclaiming their allegiance to the Mahdi, is based on an example captured by the Berkshires during the battle. The fact that the Bija surprised the British position, and the speed of their attack, spared them an initial approach though an effective British kill zone; instead, the battle will depend on the outcome of the hand-to-hand fighting that is about to occur.

animals and their unarmed drivers. The British had previously noticed the extraordinary courage of the Bija when they attacked, and it was evident again here. At Tamai the war correspondent Bennett Burleigh left a graphic description of its cost, noting the way the attackers disregarded all but the most severe gunshot wounds as they strove to close on the enemy (Snook 2010: 68).

The attack also overran the partially completed southern *zariba*, cutting down the Gardner gun crew before they had time to get their gun working. Many men of the 1st Berkshire had only just rushed in from cutting scrub and grabbed at their rifles and equipment before trying to find a formation to join. They were driven back across the enclosure of the southern *zariba*, but managed to rally on its northern edge and open fire on the Bija pushing through towards them. McNeill himself had been nearby when the attack began and he rode over, calling on the men to rally; as they did so, he ordered their officers to try to retake the *zariba*. Several close-range volleys by the 1st Berkshire, followed by a rush, cleared the enclosures and forced the Bija outside the thorn-bush fence.

By now the Bija attack was developing all around the British position and to the west the 15th Bengal Native Infantry and 28th Bombay Native Infantry came under attack. Their brief respite stood them in good stead and they reacted well, allowing the fleeing work parties and vedettes to clear their line of fire before volleying into the moving figures of the Bija among the scrub beyond. Here and there groups of Bija emerged from the smoke and bush and there were brief flurries of hand-to-hand fighting as the

This illustration captures the initial confusion among the British at Tofrek as the Bija scattered the baggage animals and burst into the *zariba*. (Author's collection)



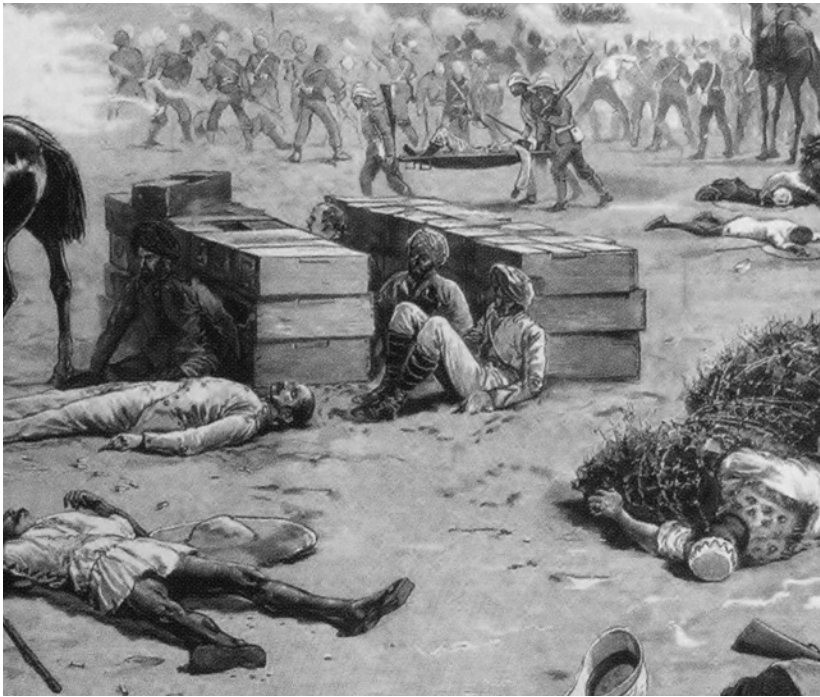
Indians defended themselves with the bayonet, but the Bija failed to penetrate the lines.

To the east, soldiers of the half-companies of the 1st Berkshire that had remained outside the enclosures found themselves cut off by the mass of baggage animals, drivers and exultant Bija pushing through the central *zariba*. With the Bija now reaching them, too, the men of the 1st Berkshire formed square. In the chaos of dust and smoke it was impossible to see clearly what was going on, so the 1st Berkshire began volley-firing on all sides. This soon discouraged the Bija in the immediate vicinity and the Berkshires began to advance, still in square, towards the centre of the enclosures and the rest of their battalion. Here the stampede of men and baggage animals had largely passed through, disrupting part of the Royal Marine position in the northern *zariba* and bursting through the Indian line facing north. Many of the civilian drivers were cut down and killed and here and there knots of soldiers from various units struggled hand-to-hand with the Bija. The incursion was potentially a catastrophic one, but in fact the rallying of the Berkshires on either side had prevented many fresh Bija joining the rush, while some of those who were distracted by the prospect of loot lost the impetus of their attack. Inside the northern *zariba*, apart from a few men carried away in the confusion, the RMLI quickly took up firing positions and added their volleys to those directed into the central enclosure. The Royal Navy commander of the Gardner gun managed to manoeuvre his gun into position to fire a few short bursts.

After perhaps half an hour it was clear that the Bija attack was losing strength. In the centre it had come within a hair's breadth of breaking up the

This illustration depicts the hand-to-hand fighting at Tofrek; note the distinctive style of the *jibbehs* worn by the Bija. (Author's collection)





This illustration depicts the inside of the *zariba* after the Bija had been driven out, scattered with dead and dying. (Author's collection)

entire British position, but the steadiness of the troops in holding their ground had inflicted such heavy losses that the Bija could not exploit their advantage. Nevertheless, as the British attempted to clear and secure the enclosures, there were still hundreds of Bija close by in the bush, and at about 1530hrs they seemed to be gathering for another attack to the south-east. McNeill directed two companies of the RMLI – who had not suffered the effects of much close-quarter fighting – to march out from their *zariba* to mount a counter-attack. The men formed line, advanced towards the bush and fired several volleys, and the Bija dispersed.

While the battle around the *zariba* played out there had been a smart cavalry action on the track back to Suakin. The party of the 20th Hussars, who had ridden several miles back with their report of McNeill's earlier situation, had met a squadron of the 9th Bengal Cavalry coming in the opposite direction. The two groups had just met when they heard the sound of heavy firing behind them and decided to return towards the *zariba* to investigate. They had not gone far when they met a herd of panic-stricken baggage animals intermingled with fleeing drivers and some of the British and Indian troops who had been scattered in the ferocity of the first attack. The Bija were close by, cutting down stragglers and trying to round up the camels. The cavalry placed themselves between the fugitives, dismounted and opened fire with their carbines. When the Bija fell back the cavalry mounted up and harassed them before repeating the procedure.

During this fighting the cavalry were exposed to a grim feature of warfare in the Sudan. As they passed over the bodies of the Bija they had shot during the skirmish, several of them sprang up and attempted to cut at the men or horses before being shot down. It had already become clear that, committed to *jihad*, some even badly wounded *ansar* would save the last of their strength

when lying wounded in the hope of being able to struggle up and aim one last blow at a passing soldier before being sent to paradise. At the *zaribas* the same thing was happening, and a young officer of the 1st Berkshire, searching for his horse in the confusion of the central enclosure, was stabbed by an apparently dead Bija who suddenly sprang up behind him. Several incidents of this nature had already led to wariness on the part of the British and as McNeill's men secured the *zariba*, driving out or finishing off the last of the lingering Bija, they despatched a number of wounded who still showed the potential to fight.

By 1630hrs the Bija had finally melted into the bush and the battle was over. British losses were heavy – ten officers and 131 men killed and five officers and 150 men wounded, and a further 160 civilian camel-drivers were also killed, together with as many as 700 camels. The Mahdist losses were far heavier, however, estimated at 1,500 men out of the 5,000 who had mounted the charge. Some 112 dead *ansar* were found within the confines of the southern *zariba* alone. One company of the 15th Bengal Native Infantry, which had borne the brunt of the attack on that side, counted 92 bodies in front of its position, while 200 more lay around the spot where the Berkshires had formed square.

The battle was hardly characterized by great tactical sophistication, but 'Uthman Diqna had handled the Bija perfectly to exploit the element of surprise and the attack had, in the manner of so many Mahdist assaults, depended largely on one fierce charge. It had almost succeeded in splitting the British position in two, and come close to overwhelming the British and Indian units piecemeal, but the fact that it had not reinforced the advantages the British held in terms of discipline and firepower.

Ironically, the battle at Tofrek achieved the ascendancy Graham had been hoping to achieve with his projected attack on Tamanieb. At the beginning of April Graham made his advance on the Bija concentrations at Tamai, but this time the *ansar* faded away before him. Apart from some mopping-up operations the fight for the Red Sea littoral was over; the Bija had finally begun to lose confidence in 'Uthman Diqna, and were reluctant to face British volleys on his behalf again.

Graham had achieved London's objectives of suppressing the Bija and securing the safety of Suakin; but when British troops were being withdrawn from the Sudan in the wake of the fall of Khartoum, Graham was ordered to evacuate his force from Suakin. Despite Graham's victories, the Sudan was being abandoned to the Mahdi.

Atbara

8 April 1898

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

The Mahdi's scale of achievement was remarkable. In just five years he had mobilized a popular revolt that had unified tribal divisions in the cause not only of religion but also of a common yearning to be free of an oppressive foreign administration. He had seen off not only the Egyptians but their infinitely more experienced and better equipped British backers; only Suakin remained in Egyptian hands. A new capital sprang up from his camp at Omdurman, across the Nile from the ruins of Gordon's palace. Yet Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah's triumph was short lived – in June 1885 he died, probably of typhus, just four short months after Gordon, the man he had defeated.

Leadership of the Mahdiyya fell to the Mahdi's leading disciple, the Khalifa Abdullahi al-Taishi, and the Khalifa's rule would be largely devoted to consolidating his predecessor's achievements. There had been no Sudanese state before the Mahdi, and it fell to the Khalifa, an able enough administrator, to create a system of government from scratch. The Khalifa extended the Mahdi's experiments with a permanent army of *ansar*, and attempted to extend a system of Islamic rule across a country still simmering with tribal and regional differences, and plagued occasionally by political intrigues among his governors and commanders.

In Egypt, meanwhile, the British had assumed direct control of the Egyptian Army on behalf of the Khedive, imposing a new structure led by British officers, improving pay, living conditions and training among the ordinary rank-and-file, and replacing the old Remington rifles with the British Martini-Henry.

Under the Khalifa friction between the Mahdiyya and Egypt continued. In December 1885 the Mahdists tentatively probed the Egyptian border



A British infantryman of the 1890s stands to attention. In the years after the failure of the 1885 expeditions, khaki became standard field wear across the Empire, with the helmet being worn with a khaki cover and neck-protector in the Sudan, and the Martini-Henry single-shot rifle was replaced by the magazine-fed Lee-Metford. (Author's collection)

OPPOSITE

A .303 Lee-Metford Mk I bolt-action magazine rifle. The Mk II, which differed only in the capacity of the magazine (it carried ten rounds in two rows rather than the Mk I's eight rounds), was the standard British infantry weapon during the reconquest of the Sudan. The Lee-Metford's higher muzzle velocity and dramatically improved rate of fire made it a great improvement on the Martini-Henry rifle. (© Royal Armouries XII.5034)

in the wake of the general withdrawal of British troops, but were defeated by an Anglo-Egyptian force at Ginnis – a battle that bears the distinction of being the last major action fought by British detachments in red coats. Although 'Uthman Diqna's influence among the Bija had declined after Tofrek, he continued to lead his remaining followers in sharp skirmishes with the Egyptian garrison around Suakin. In 1889 the Khalifa made another attempt to invade southern Egypt, but was defeated in a series of fights that culminated in the battle of Toski on 3 August.

At the same time the Mahdiyya had been involved in a protracted struggle with the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia, to its south-west – despite some *ansar* successes, including the death of King Yohannes IV (r. 1871–89) in action at the battle of Gallabat on 9–10 March 1889, they never managed to control the country – and against some black African groups in the southern Sudan who had refused to embrace Islam.

For the most part, although public indignation about the apparent abandonment and death of Gordon remained high in Britain, there was little appetite for a fresh intervention in the Sudan at Government level. Things began to change, however, as the European 'Scramble for Africa' accelerated in the mid-1890s, with both Italy and France pushing into territories in north-east Africa that the British regarded as within their strategic sphere of influence. Despite a spectacular defeat by the Abyssinians at Adwa on 1 March 1896, Italy succeeded in securing a toehold in the Horn of Africa while a French expedition advanced slowly through central Africa, approaching the Sudanese border from the south. In response the British Government agreed to a further campaign in the Sudan, initially providing the burden fell on the Anglo-Egyptian Army, although British troops were inevitably drawn into the conflict later. The task fell to Kitchener, who had some experience of the Sudan. Having served as an intelligence officer in the Gordon Relief Expedition, he understood that success would depend on mastering the logistics of campaigning in the desert. His solution was to construct the Sudan Military Railway, a remarkable feat of engineering designed by Royal Engineer officers and built by conscripted Egyptian labour, which followed the route of the Nile to the Sudanese border and allowed Kitchener to amass 18,000 troops and their necessary supplies.

Kitchener's political brief was not to attempt to conquer the entire Sudan but rather to annex the northern province of Dongola. In early June 1896 he crossed into the Sudan and the newly created Egyptian Army proved its worth by smartly defeating the local Mahdist garrison at Firket on the 7th. From there Kitchener advanced slowly and cautiously to the town of Dongola itself, which was captured after brief skirmishing.

The Khalifa's reaction to this obvious threat remains problematic. He might, perhaps, have been wary of advancing his forces too far from the Mahdiyya heartland around Omdurman and in the Kordofan, and he was undoubtedly aware that, apart from 'Uthman Diqna, many of the *amirs* and *shaikhs* who had won the great victories of the 1880s were dead, replaced by younger men with less direct experience of the realities of modern warfare. He may also have been influenced by religious visions which directed him to confront the invaders on a plain north of Omdurman which lay between the Kereri hills and the Nile; most likely, however, he was aware that similar British and Egyptian expeditions had become increasingly vulnerable the deeper they had advanced into the Sudan.

The relative ease with which Kitchener had conquered Dongola prompted the British Government to bite the bullet and authorize the conquest of the Sudan as a whole. Kitchener was wary of entrusting such a task entirely to the Egyptians and the Government finally agreed to send him reinforcements from the British Army.

Although just 12 years had passed since the Gordon Relief Expedition and the Suakin campaign, the British Army had changed significantly. The grey field uniforms worn in the 1880s – the first tentative step towards a practical fighting uniform – had given way to a light uniform of khaki drill, and, more significantly, the British Army's firepower had increased exponentially. The Martini-Henry single-shot rifle had been replaced by the bolt-action magazine-fed Lee-Metford, which fired a smaller-calibre .303 bullet but with a greater velocity and a much greater rate of fire; and the cumbersome hand-cranked machine guns of the 1880s had been replaced by the belt-fed, water-cooled Maxim machine gun, which could fire an astonishing 600 rounds per minute (although its ammunition belts contained only 250 rounds), and which was widely championed as a light, manoeuvrable infantry and cavalry support weapon.

Kitchener's invasion began in July 1897 with a rapid advance by his Sudanese troops up the Nile to capture Abu Hamed, at the head of the great bend in the river that had so troubled Wolseley's advance. There was still no sign of a large concentration of Mahdist troops and local *ansar* garrisons were brushed aside. With Abu Hamed secure, Kitchener was able to push the desert railway directly across the desert from his base at Wadi Half, a distance of 230 miles that was covered in just ten months. Abu Hamed became Kitchener's staging post for the final dash downriver towards Omdurman. In February his force was stiffened by the arrival of a brigade of British infantry, and the stage was set for the largest confrontation yet between the Anglo-Egyptian invaders and the Sudanese.

The British movements had been obvious to the Khalifa for months, but he had remained slow to respond. The inhabitants of the river around Metemmeh, between Omdurman and Abu Hamed, were the Ja'liyin tribe who had taken a fierce role at Abu Klea but were now disillusioned with the Mahdiyya. The Khalifa may have doubted their loyalty, and instead he collected a large force of some 12,000 largely Baqqara Arabs, supported by the *jihadiyya* and some impressed Egyptian artillerymen, and sent them first to Metemmeh, to intimidate the Ja'liyin, and then north to block the route from Abu Hamed. They were commanded by a young, able but largely inexperienced *amir*, Mahmud wad Ahmad, and along the way they were joined by 'Uthman Diqna and 4,000 Bija, now fully integrated into the Mahdist *ansar*. The two *amirs* seem to have disagreed on the best strategy, Mahmud wad Ahmad urging attack and 'Uthman Diqna, with an insight born of experience, urging caution, Mahmud wad Ahmad remained in the vicinity of Mettemeh, coming under occasional shelling from gunboats despatched by Kitchener to probe the Mahdist movements, until he crossed the Nile and moved north-west to its confluence with the Atbara River. Here he built a large entrenched camp on the banks of the river.

Kitchener now had 14,000 men advancing down the Nile, and the two armies were just 8 miles apart.



- 1 c.0600hrs:** British forces deploy in line overlooking the Mahdist camp.
- 2 c.0615hrs:** British artillery deployed forward of the infantry begins bombarding the Mahdist *zariba*.
- 3 c.0630hrs:** Mahdist horsemen emerge from the right rear of the *zariba* and move to encircle the British left; they are halted by Maxim machine-gun fire from cavalry screening the British flank.
- 4 c.0715hrs:** The British infantry (including Egyptian and Sudanese battalions) deploy in column ready to attack.
- 5 c.0730hrs:** The British advance to attack the thorn hedge and trenches surrounding the Mahdist *zariba*. On the right, troops of 1st Battalion, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, deploy in line and fire into the *zariba* to support

an attack in column by 1st Battalion, The Lincolnshire Regiment, and 1st Battalion, The Seaforth Highlanders (Ross-shire Buffs, The Duke of Albany's); on the left the Egyptian and Sudanese battalions also assault the outer defences.

- 6 c.0730hrs:** Kitchener advances with the baggage-wagon guard to direct the attack.
- 7 c.0745hrs:** As the British columns clear the outer defences, heavy fighting continues in the scrub among the huts within the *zariba*. In particular, the bodyguard of the *amir* Mahmud wad Ahmad stoutly defend a redoubt in the centre of the Mahdist position. Over the next 45 minutes the British steadily sweep through the *zariba*, often fighting hand-to-hand.
- 8 c.0835hrs:** Many of the Mahdists flee from the rear of the *zariba*, escaping along the dry course of the Atbara River. Once the British have cleared the enclosure the battle is over.

Battlefield environment

Unlike either Abu Klea or Tofrek, the battle of Atbara took place against a backdrop characterized by a significant geographical feature, the Atbara River itself, not far from its confluence with the Nile. The terrain was typical of the desert river-valley, with low hills and rises rising up along the ancient course of the river, and sloping down towards the riverbanks, which were marked by a narrow belt of vegetation. The river itself was dry on the day of the battle apart from some long-stagnant pools in the bed that allowed Mahmud wad Ahmad to water his animals. The ground on either side was marked with grass, thorn-bush and scattered date-palms.

Mahmud wad Ahmad had chosen to place his encampment between the rising ground in front and the riverbanks behind so that the river provided a defensive feature in his rear. Unlike Abu Klea the sand and soil were soft enough to allow him to construct a series of fortifications, a largely contiguous irregular circle of trenches backed up on the inside by smaller rifle-pits and bunkers. The outside of the enclosure was protected by a thorn-bush fence, while in the middle was a further square

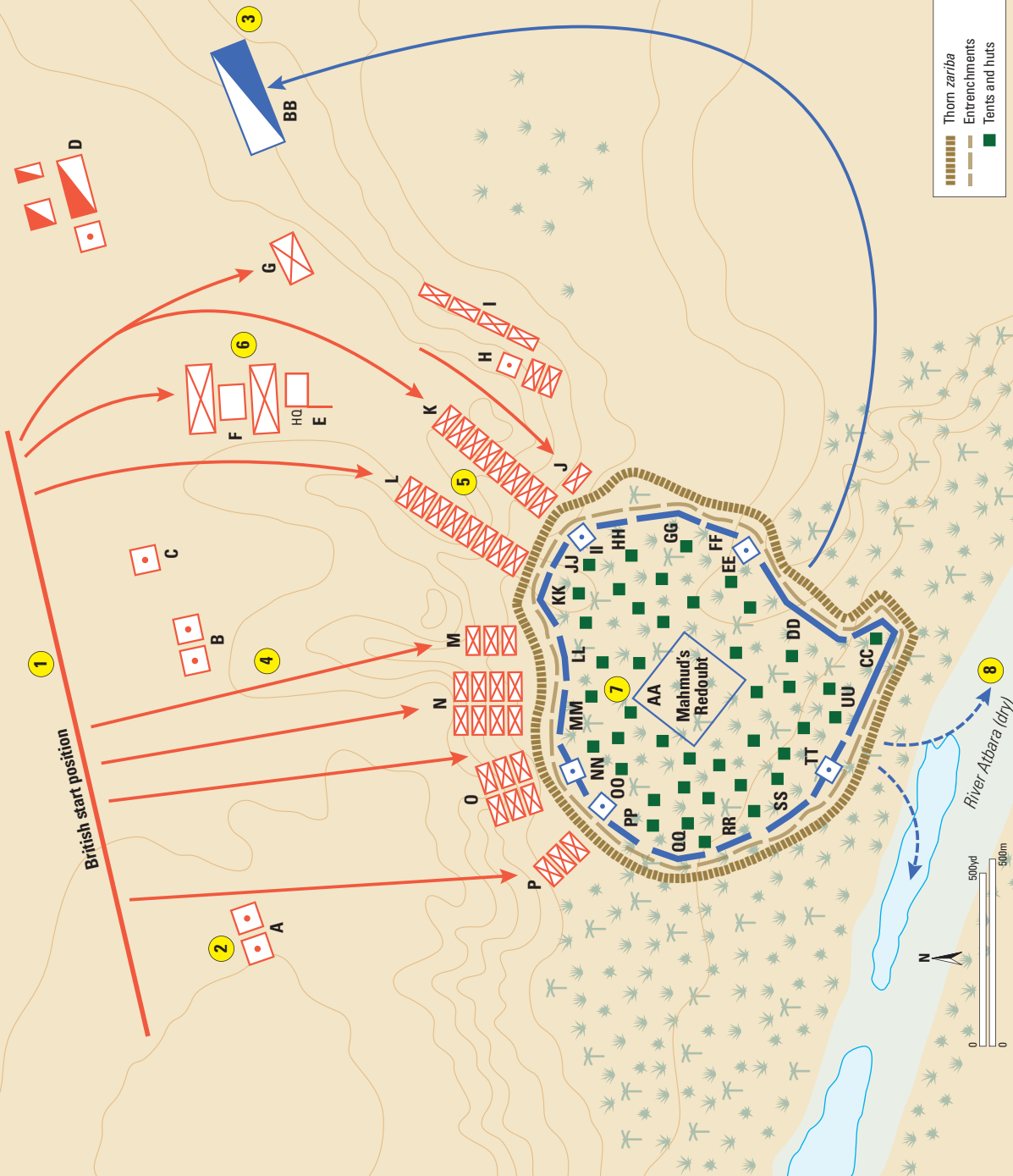
enclosure of trenches and palisades that marked the site of Mahmud wad Ahmad's command centre. From a distance the defences looked formidable, but in fact the thorn-bush *zariba* proved easy for the British to penetrate, while the trenches were not deep enough to provide effective protection against shellfire. Within the enclosure were a jumble of tents and huts made of brushwood or palm leaves that served to house Mahmud wad Ahmad's men.

Kitchener opted for a frontal attack, advancing across the exposed rises and down towards the camp; as such his troops, in close formations exposed in largely open terrain, were vulnerable to Mahdist musketry on the approach, but in fact the defenders failed to exploit their advantage. Once the British-led forces were through the perimeter, it was the jumbled nature of the interior works and huts, some of them set on fire by that point by the preparatory artillery barrage, which caused them the only real inconvenience of the battle. Only during the final stages, when many of the Mahdists retired from the *zariba* and fled down the bed of the Atbara, did the terrain really serve to assist either side.

- British units:**
- A** Two batteries (12 guns)
 - B** Two batteries (12 guns)
 - C** Rocket detachment, Royal Navy
 - D** Eight squadrons of Egyptian cavalry, supported by two Maxim machine guns
 - E** Kitchener's headquarters
 - F** 7th Egyptian Regt
 - G** 3rd and 4th Egyptian regts
 - H** Six Maxim machine guns
 - I** 1st Bn, Royal Warwickshire Regt
 - J** 1st Bn, Cameron Highlanders
 - K** 1st Bn, Seaforth Highlanders
 - L** 1st Bn, Lincolnshire Regt
 - M** 11th Sudanese Regt
 - N** 9th and 10th Sudanese regts, 2nd Egyptian Regt
 - O** 12th and 14th Sudanese regts
 - P** 8th Egyptian Regt and 13th Sudanese Regt

- Mahdist forces:**
- AA** Mahmud wad Ahmad, his bodyguard and the Amirs Musar Enur, Mohammed and Bishara and El Nurel Gol
 - BB** Baqqara cavalry
 - CC** 'Uthman Digna
 - DD** Mahmud Fadlalla
 - EE** Two guns
 - FF** Bishari Revda
 - GG** Abdalla Hamed
 - HH** Ali Senusi
 - II** Two guns
 - JJ** Abdal Mutalab (commanding artillery)
 - KK** Ata wad Usul
 - LL** Abdal Gadir
 - MM** Gun
 - NN** Wad Delli
 - OO** Gun
 - PP** Fadil Hassana
 - QQ** Eiissa Zakaria
 - RR** Marmet Zakki Osman
 - SS** Selah Abu
 - TT** Gun
 - UU** Fadil Adam

- Thorn zariba
- Entrenchments
- Tents and huts



INTO COMBAT

Mahmud wad Ahmad's *zariba* was an irregular circle, built on open ground of the largely dry Atbara riverbank. It was surrounded around the outside by a dense hedge of thorn-bush that screened a line of interconnected trenches and rifle-pits. There were sections of stout stockade including a central square bastion that housed Mahmud wad Ahmad's own camp. The *ansar* bivouacked inside in a warren of temporary huts made of branches, grass and palm leaves, and tents, clustered around their respective *amirs* and *shaikhs*. Several captured Egyptian artillery pieces were placed around the perimeter. From the outside the position looked formidable and it seems that Kitchener was wary of attacking it, sending forth cavalry patrols on at least two occasions in the hope of finding weaknesses or of drawing the *ansar* out. In fact the defences were not as thorough as they looked and in places the barricades and rifle-pits were incomplete or badly placed, but Kitchener, no doubt mindful of the stout resistance offered to the Gordon Relief Expedition, hesitated for more than a week, until urged to attack by London. For his part, Mahmud wad Ahmad made no effort to move out of his defences; and the first great battle of the conquest began with both sides seeming unusually lethargic.

Kitchener finally decided to attack the *zariba* at first light on 8 April 1898. His men were roused before dawn and marched across the desert to take up a position on a low rise to the north about 700yd from the nearest defences, effectively trapping Mahmud wad Ahmad with his back against the river. On

Soldiers of the 1st Seaforth Highlanders burst into the *zariba* in the face of fierce opposition from the *ansar* concealed among the trenches, rifle-pits and huts within. (Author's collection)



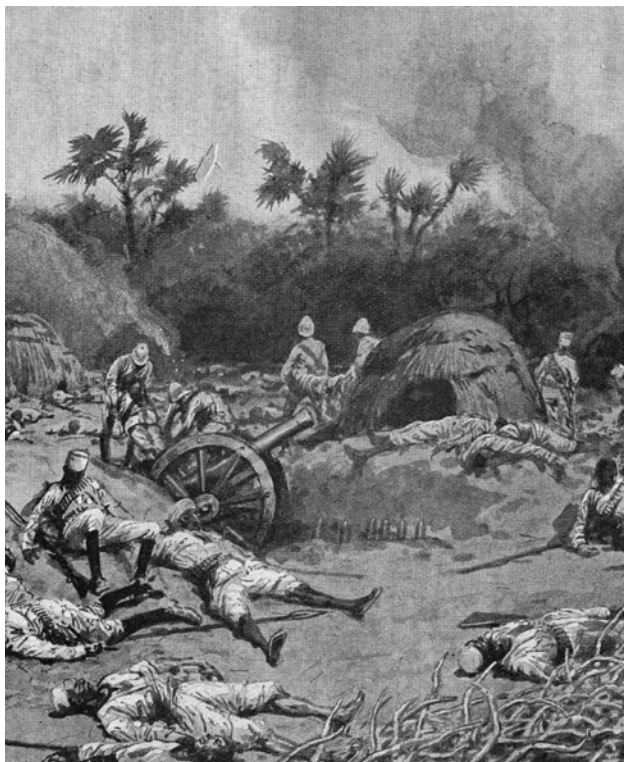
the extreme left were seven squadrons of Egyptian cavalry supported by two Maxim machine guns under Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Broadwood. Next to them, after a gap of 500yd, was the British Brigade under Major-General William Gatacre, composed of infantry from 1st Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment; 1st Battalion, The Lincolnshire Regiment; 1st Battalion, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders; and 1st Battalion, The Seaforth Highlanders (Ross-shire Buffs, The Duke of Albany's). To their right was the 2nd Egyptian Brigade (the 9th, 10th and 11th Soudanese and the 2nd Egyptians) under Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Hector MacDonald, then the 1st Egyptian Brigade (the 12th, 13th and 14th Soudanese and the 8th Egyptians) under Lieutenant-Colonel Sir John Maxwell. The 3rd Egyptian Brigade (3rd, 4th, 7th and detachments of the 15th Egyptians) under Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel D.F. Lewis was in reserve to the left rear. Two batteries of artillery were

deployed on the extreme left of the British line and two more in front of the British centre. A Naval Brigade rocket detachment was placed initially on the left of the British line, but later moved across the right.

The presence of the Maxims gave the British a huge advantage in firepower. After the battle it was argued that Kitchener might have used the height advantage offered by the low rise to enfilade the *ansar* trenches and to make their positions untenable, but in fact he opted for an attack that, even by the standards of the day, was pedestrian. At around 0615hrs the artillery opened up, lobbing shells into the *zariba* until it was soon entirely wreathed in smoke. The *ansar* in the trenches offered no response, but a body of Mahdist cavalry, perhaps 1,000 strong, emerged from the sheltered right rear of the *zariba* and moved rapidly to the left of the British line, perhaps hoping to outflank it. Instead they were met by Broadwood's cavalry, who opened fire with the Maxims, causing the *ansar* to fall back and withdraw from the fray.

The Naval Brigade rocket detachment had added its fire to the artillery barrage and several of the Mahdist huts within the enclosure were set on fire. There was little sign of the *ansar* themselves, however, most of whom had taken shelter in the rifle-pits. The artillery barrage lasted for half an hour before Kitchener, watching from a commanding position on the slope on the left, ordered it to cease fire, and directed his brigade commanders to prepare to attack. On the left the British Brigade formed up with its battalions drawn up behind one another in column of companies and Gatacre himself at their head with his headquarters clerk carrying a large Union flag. As Gatacre began to move down the slope the Egyptian brigades, their companies arrayed in line, began to move forward at the double. Gatacre no doubt felt that an attack in column would build up an irresistible momentum and reduce the number of men exposed to return fire but, though he halted several times to allow the leading companies of the 1st Cameron Highlanders to fire volleys, his restricted front offered him no chance to maximize the firepower at his disposal.

The infantry advance was pressed forward across open ground largely clear of the scrub that lay along the riverbanks of the Atbara behind the *zariba*, and the attackers were dangerously exposed to Mahdist fire, but the *jihadiyya* displayed little of the skill at long-range harassing fire they had mastered during the Gordon Relief Expedition. Instead, the *zariba* remained silent until the leading British formations were 300yd away before fire crashed out along the northern face. Although the British and Egyptian battalions suffered



This illustration depicts the scene of carnage within the *zariba* after the battle; casualties from the Sudanese battalions of the Egyptian Army are visible in the foreground. (Author's collection)

casualties, the distance was too short for the losses to be decisive, and several soldiers noted that much of the shot went high.

From a distance the defences had looked impenetrable and contingency plans had been drawn up to blow holes through the thorn-bush; instead, the men found that the bushes could be dragged aside, and they wrapped their blankets around their hands to do so. On the British left the 1st Cameron Highlanders deployed into line along the edge of the barricade, to the left of the rest of the column, firing volley after volley across the thorns while the companies to their right fought their way through. Gatacre himself was one of the first into the enclosure and as he pulled at the bushes an *ansar* came at him with a spear, only to be shot down by Gatacre's orderly. The carrying of colours into action had been forbidden since 1881 and Gatacre was offered a forceful reminder as to why; his orderly carrying the Union flag was an obvious target and fell with a bullet in the leg, mortally wounded.

Of this stage of the battle Sergeant Christian of the 1st Seaforth Highlanders recalled that when his battalion reached the *zariba*, the 1st Cameron Highlanders were firing continuously; after a token show of resistance the *ansar* broke and fled toward the river. Christian reported that *ansar* chained to logs were firing into the battalion's rear as it advanced, and that many of his comrades went back and bayoneted them (Emery 1986: 155).

Further to the British right, the Egyptian and Sudanese troops reached the barricade at a run and forced their way into the enclosure. Once in, it was difficult to maintain cohesion, and fierce fighting broke out with *ansar*

sheltering in the trenches and among the huts. Amid the smoke and dust and well aware of the tales of Mahdist wounded still presenting danger, neither the British nor the Egyptian troops were inclined to take risks and the battle dissolved into a protracted hand-to-hand struggle with no quarter offered.

As the troops struggled slowly through the enclosure, numbers of *ansar* began to slip away at the back, down into the Atbara riverbed. Among them were 'Uthman Diqna and his Bija, who had perhaps never been wholly committed to Mahmud wad Ahmad's tactics, and whose choice of an encampment spot, close to the riverbank, may not have been coincidental. Mahmud wad Ahmad himself stuck to his position and was found sheltering in the centre of his redoubt. Dragged out, he was bayoneted through the leg by men of the 10th Soudanese before a passing staff officer recognized him

Men of the 1st Cameron and 1st Seaforth Highlanders bury their dead after Atbara; the casualties are carried to their graves wrapped in blankets, visible between the figures. (Author's collection)



and ordered him to be taken before Kitchener.

It took perhaps an hour for the British and Egyptian forces to sweep through the camp, flushing out the *ansar*, many of whom continued to resist unto death – the rest fleeing away down the Atbara in the wake of 'Uthman Diqna. Even in the adrenalin rush of combat, some in the Anglo-Egyptian force were horrified by the slaughter, such as Corporal D. Anderson of the 1st Lincolnshire, who recalled seeing trenches full of dead and dying *ansar* and the appalling smell coming from burning huts full of Mahdist wounded (Spiers 2004: 147).

Anglo-Egyptian casualties were 81 killed and 478 wounded, many of those in the British Brigade falling during the exposed advance, the result of Kitchener's unimaginative approach. The Anglo-Egyptian wounded, once they had been extricated from the shambles of the *zariba*, had to endure a long wait exposed in the sun for the rest of the day until Egyptian stretcher-bearers were made available to carry them back to Kitchener's camp, 8 miles away.

The number of dead Mahdists was not officially recorded. Most estimates put the figure at between 2,000 and 3,000, but it was rumoured that Kitchener had suppressed a much larger figure to avoid condemnation for the ruthlessness of his attack. Some indication of the firepower to which they had been subjected can be drawn from the fact that the British Brigade alone fired 56,000 rounds of rifle ammunition.

At Atbara, neither side displayed any great tactical flair. Mahmud wad Ahmad had squandered the strengths of the *jihadiyya*, who had made no attempt to harass Kitchener's advance as they had during the Gordon Relief Expedition. Nor had he unleashed the *ansar*'s terrifying capability for a mass charge. Kitchener, on the other hand, had attacked by the book and his officers squabbled among themselves after the battle as to whether a more inspired approach might have led to a smaller butcher's bill.

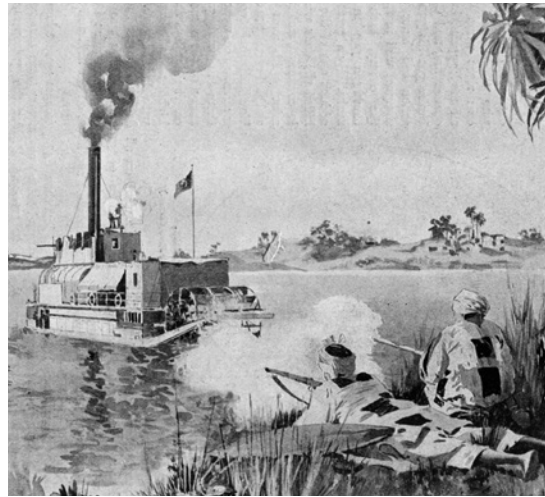
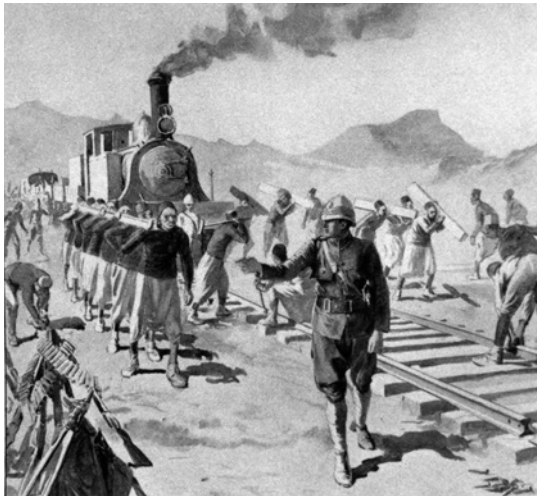
In reality, though, Atbara revealed a painful truth – that in the years since the Mahdi's victories the balance of power had swung inexorably in favour of the British. The discipline of the British infantry, the revitalized Egyptian and Sudanese battalions, and the availability of Maxim machine guns and magazine rifles had all left the *ansar* woefully exposed. Inspired leadership might have saved them, but the Khalifa's commanders seemed to lack the dash of those of the early days, when the movement was rushing from success to success, and in the months to come the situation would only get worse.



This photograph captures a moment from the burial of a British officer; his helmet lies upon his grave, the mark of the shot that killed him clearly visible. (Author's collection)

Analysis

By the time of the battle of Abu Klea the *ansar* military tradition was only four years old. Certainly, some of the Mahdi's early followers in the Kordofan had a reputation as raiders, but there was no pre-existing Mahdist army, no established tradition of pan-tribal military cooperation, no training, and only limited battlefield experience. Nevertheless, by 1884 the Mahdi had managed to infuse disparate groups with a sense of common purpose and energy, and common tactics were beginning to emerge in an attempt to neutralize the superior firepower of the Anglo-Egyptian forces by utilizing the *ansar's* buoyant morale and its better understanding of local terrain. Although Abu Klea was a British success, it was only narrowly so, and the battle demonstrated the strength of a distinct style of Mahdist fighting that was just then emerging. The concentration of firearms among the *jihadiyya* had allowed the *ansar* to deploy musket-men continually to harass the British advance, both before and after the battle – something which wore on British nerves and made the already difficult crossing of desert terrain even more challenging. Although the *jihadiyya's* fire was irritating, it was not sufficient to halt the British advance; for that the Mahdist commanders would rely upon the shock-charge of their swordmen and spearmen. In order for this to succeed they knew they would have to move a large body of men rapidly to contact through a British fire zone that was potentially hugely destructive. Accordingly, they sought to bring the British onto favourable ground by feinting with false advances. When the attack was finally launched it erupted from a sheltered *chor* just a few hundred yards from the British position, at a time when the British were clearly struggling to manoeuvre. The surprise and fierce rush of the *ansar* carried them through the British fire zone, and they were quick to take advantage of self-inflicted disruption in the British square. Once the charge had reached its target its success depended on their ferocity of hand-to-hand fighting, and it nearly succeeded; but it was a tactic that required an immediate success, since it afforded no second chance. When the



British matched the *ansar* in hand-to-hand fighting, and did not collapse, the *ansar* had few options but to retire – a move that would further expose them to British fire as they went.

The British performance, in contrast, was hampered by poor coordination. Although the concept of mounting selected troops from different units on camels had been an innovative approach to the difficulties of crossing hostile terrain, the men were drawn from a variety of units, and those from the cavalry, in particular, were inexperienced at infantry tactics. The strength of a British square was that it produced an even field of fire on all sides and could not be surrounded; but the corners produced a gap between the outward-facing fire zones that needed to be carefully protected, and at Abu Klea that danger was exacerbated by the awkward manoeuvring of units on either side of the left-rear corner. This not only left the square incomplete but also produced interrupted fields of fire, a situation compounded by the poor placing of the Gardner gun, which deployed between the firing line and the approaching *ansar*. These factors aided the Mahdist commanders and provided just the sort of weak spots that they were searching for. The fact that the British won the battle was largely due to their discipline, determination at close-quarter fighting, and to the success of company commanders in re-establishing control amid the confusion. The absence of the limited British cavalry force from the battlefield prevented the usual pursuit of a retreating enemy, and spared the *ansar* further casualties.

In the eastern Sudan, by the time the Bija attacked McNeill's expedition at Tofrek both they and 'Uthman Diqna had, in a short space of time, become highly experienced in fighting Anglo-Egyptian armies on their home terrain. Diqna had easily routed Egyptian troops at the first battle of El Teb and had only narrowly lost two later encounters with much better-armed British forces at the second battle of El Teb and Tamai. While Diqna's tactics followed the broad pattern of those used elsewhere by Mahdist forces, he lacked a separate *jihadiyya* rifle-arm and instead relied on exploiting the more broken terrain around Suakin. Like the Mahdist commanders at Abu Klea, he realized that the greatest danger was from British firepower, and in his previous battle he too had sought to negate it by using the ground as cover to enable him to

ABOVE LEFT

The desert railway proved decisive in the struggle for the Sudan. The re-conquest was won not by any great change in the fighting spirit of both sides, but by Kitchener's determination to harness the power of Britain's Industrial Revolution to overcome the terrain that had defeated Wolseley a decade before. (Author's collection)

ABOVE RIGHT

Kitchener's gunboats harass the Mahdists down the Nile towards Khartoum. Kitchener's use of more efficient gunboats added to his ability to take the war to the Mahdiyya. (Author's collection)



This *ansar* wears the *jibbeh* of the 1890s and the rest of the costume specified by the Mahdi: a turban with the end drawn under the chin, a girdle of plaited straw and prayer beads. He is armed with a typical spear and *kaskara* sword. (Author's collection)

launch determined charges at close range. At Tofrek, the British decision to avoid the established route, through comparatively open terrain, and to march instead through a belt of thorn-bush, played into Diqna's hands, enabling him to approach the British position without being detected. The thorn-bush also prevented the British from establishing a proper fire zone around their position. Although the Bija attack fell initially on two sides of the British position, Diqna immediately recognized that the British left was its most vulnerable area and directed particular attention to that. The accumulation of baggage camels in the same area also offered a further means of sheltering his attack. As at Abu Klea, however, a Mahdist victory depended on the success of one fierce charge, and although the Bija who reached the British positions fought desperately they were not able to overcome them before the British could regroup.

Conversely, although the British were well aware of the Bija's capabilities, they had failed properly to secure their advance against them. Poor intelligence communication had failed to pass on the fact that the Bija were assembling in the area, while the thorn-bush disrupted the British advance and allowed elements to become dangerously separated. Although both mounted vedettes and infantry picquets were posted, no effective warning of the Bija approach was secured; indeed, the outposts rushed in with the Bija so close behind them that the troops around the *zariba* were in some places unable to fire for fear of hitting their own men. Where the *zariba* was incomplete or the defensive screen exposed the Bija were able to push it back. That the British were able to regain the initiative was largely due to the resolve of those elements that held their positions under the first attack. As at Abu Klea, once the British were able to secure fire supremacy they were able to drive the Bija away from their positions.

Nevertheless, the outcome of the battle had been close, prompting Graham to question in official despatches whether the square was a viable tactic against a foe such as the Bija who recognized its strengths, used cover to avoid them, and were extremely quick and flexible to spot and exploit its weaknesses.

By the battle of Atbara it is clear that the Mahdists had lost some of the enthusiasm that had been a key element of the 1884–85 campaigns. Despite being more effectively organized, the enthusiasm for the Mahdist cause that had carried them to victory over Hicks and Gordon had become compromised. Partly this was due to the absent charismatic leadership of the Mahdi himself, and also of those of his commanders who had perished in the years since; partly it was due to political tensions which had arisen during the consolidation of the Mahdist state, with some formerly enthusiastic adherents being marginalized or suppressed by the Khalifa in favour of his Baqqara elite. In 1885 the Mahdist movement had been rolling towards success, carrying along its adherents on a wave of religious and nationalist exuberance, but during the re-conquest it had remained psychologically on the defensive. The Khalifa himself was not in favour of defending outlying areas of the Mahdiyya but rather preferred drawing the enemy into its heartland where, he believed, the surprise attacks of old would be less successful than the mass attacks of the reorganized *ansar* forces. This tentativeness showed itself in Mahmud wad Ahmad's approach to the Atbara campaign, and an unusual reluctance to take the war to the enemy. This undoubtedly affected *ansar* morale, with 'Uthman



Diqna, in particular, having little confidence in the campaign and making plans to withdraw even before fighting had begun – and it is clear that the majority of the Mahdists did not fight with the same verve of old. Mahmud wad Ahmad's defensive position was credible, and the *jihadiyya* maintained good fire discipline, lying low under the British artillery barrage until the British were 300yd away, but their performance was unusually passive. Even the presence of Mahdist cavalry, used to try to outflank the British, was easily checked by Maxim machine guns.

Kitchener's tactics were equally unimaginative – a preparatory artillery barrage followed by an infantry attack in close formation – and allowed the *ansar* a brief opportunity to inflict casualties during the British approach. The British soon achieved fire superiority, however, and having forced a way into the *zariba*, the *ansar* were never likely to be able to resist them.

Although neither side displayed great tactical flair, the superiority of the British forces in both firepower and numbers compared with earlier battles was an obvious and decisive factor. Concentrated artillery, Maxim machine guns and magazine rifles produced a killing zone that the *ansar* could no longer counter, even if they had employed more imaginative tactics – a decisive element that rendered the Khalifa's reliance on mass attacks in the open at Omdurman catastrophic.

After Atbara, Kitchener's progress was largely unstoppable. This photograph shows the *Sirdar* and his staff during the Omdurman campaign. (Author's collection)

Aftermath

The *amir* Mahmud wad Ahmad's defeat at Atbara secured Kitchener's control over the northern Sudan and cemented political and public support for a decisive end to the conflict. Largely untroubled by the Mahdists, Kitchener pressed forward his military railway, and by August he had been heavily reinforced. He was allocated not only a fresh Egyptian brigade and eight Egyptian Camel Corps companies, but also a new British brigade (1st Battalion, Grenadier Guards; 1st Battalion, The Northumberland Fusiliers; 2nd Battalion, The Prince Consort's Own (Rifle Brigade); and 2nd Battalion, The Lancashire Fusiliers) commanded by Brigadier-General Neville Lyttelton; two Royal Artillery batteries; a Maxim detachment from 1st Battalion, The Princess Victoria's (Royal Irish Fusiliers); and the 21st Lancers – the only British regular cavalry unit to join the expedition. His build-up of forces complete, Kitchener began to probe forward down the Nile, at one point sending his gunboats far enough to shell the Mahdi's tomb. Cavalry patrols – among them a young and eager Winston Churchill – pushed forward to within sight of Omdurman, scouting out a suitable place for a decisive battle.

Curiously, it seems that both the Khalifa and Kitchener favoured the same spot, a plain on the west bank of the Nile a few miles from Omdurman framed by the Kereri hills to the north and a ridge known as Jebel Surgham to the south. Quite what the advantages of this spot for the Khalifa were remains obscure although it was within easy reach of Omdurman – the very heart of the Mahdiyya, and within the shadow of the Mahdists' great victory at Khartoum; the Khalifa may have counted on the symbolism to give the *ansar* the sort of heart they had demonstrated so ably in 1885. In any event he made little attempt to harass Kitchener further, nor did he seem seriously to consider attacking under cover of darkness. On 1 September 1898, Kitchener's men marched over the Kereri ridge from the north and bivouacked for the night with their backs to the Nile around a village called Egriga.



Before dawn the following morning the Anglo-Egyptian force stood-to and took up a defensive position, a long arc with both ends resting on the Nile, the Egyptian brigades on the right and the British on the left. The Egyptian Camel Corps secured the Kereri hills, further right, while Kitchener's gunboats cruised the Nile ready to give support.

The Mahdist forces, about 40,000 strong and including two of the principal 'flags' (the Green and Black, the latter commanded by the Khalifa's brother Yakub), appeared from the direction of Omdurman at about 0600hrs, two detachments on the right veering towards Kitchener's position, the others passing across its front towards the Kereri hills to the north. Quite what their plan was remains unclear; it is possible that those on the left intended to outflank Kitchener to his far right, or perhaps they had mistaken the Camel Corps on the hills for the vanguard of a much larger force. Either way it was a mistake; the ranges were over 1,500yd, but within striking distance not only of Kitchener's Maxim machine guns and artillery but his infantry too. The two large units on the *ansar* right turned towards Kitchener's formation and as the range closed to less than 1,000yd they were engulfed in a storm of fire. Whatever had prompted the Khalifa to seek battle on this ground had been a catastrophic miscalculation; with the plain open, flat and devoid of cover the situation entirely favoured the firepower of the invaders, and apart from a few courageous individuals the *ansar* formations got no closer than 350yd before giving up.

As the *ansar* began to retire Kitchener ordered his men to advance, and it was at this point that the Anglo-Egyptian force was most in danger. On the British right the *ansar* had chased off the Camel Corps and occupied the Kereri hills and as the Egyptians on Kitchener's right pressed past the foothills the Green Flag detachments moved down from the summit to attack them. At the same time, to the south, the Black Flag, which had remained largely in reserve, emerged from the cover of the Jebel Surgham. The leading Egyptian brigade, MacDonald's, found themselves dangerously exposed on both sides, but the *ansar* attacks were not coordinated and each attracted a storm of fire in turn until they broke.

Further south, the 21st Lancers had been instructed to pass the Jebel Surgham on the river side in an attempt to cut off the survivors of the earlier

ABOVE LEFT

This illustration shows the *ansar* charge at Omdurman. While the fierceness of the *ansar* in the battles of the 1880s had been their great strength, the lacklustre Mahdist tactics at Omdurman, which committed them to a mass attack across a mile of flat, open desert in the face of exponentially greater British firepower, spelled their destruction. (Author's collection)

ABOVE RIGHT

The charge of the 21st Lancers, a dramatic moment at the end of the battle of Omdurman, was celebrated for its heroism in Britain, but was a costly error. The *ansar* shown here are those Bija who have remained loyal to 'Uthman Digna and are now fully integrated into the Mahdist forces. (Author's collection)

attacks and prevent them returning to Omdurman. They had just done so when they saw a thin line of *ansar* ahead firing at them. The 21st had only recently changed from Hussars to Lancers and had not been in action before, having been given the sarcastic epithet of the 'Thou Shalt Not Kill' regiment. Seeing their opportunity, the cavalymen deployed into line and charged. At the last moment they realized their error as the *ansar* scattered back into a deep gully, the Khor Abu Sunt, which opened up behind them. Sheltering in the bottom of the *khôr* were perhaps 1,000 *ansar*, the majority of them Bija, led by 'Uthman Diqna. It was perhaps the one moment in the battle when the *ansar* displayed any tactical flair, and it was appropriate that it should be at the command of 'Uthman Diqna, the man who had learned well how to use the ground to neutralize the enemy's strengths. The charge was too late to halt, however, and the 21st Lancers went over the edge, crashing through the *ansar* in a flurry of hand-to-hand fighting before regrouping and attacking again from the other side. The Bija were forced out of the *khôr*, but the charge – although celebrated by the British public at home – would result in the highest British casualties of the day.

By midday the *ansar* were in retreat all across the battlefield. Anglo-Egyptian casualties were light, with just four officers and 47 other ranks killed and 382 wounded. The *ansar* losses, however, had been appalling: over 10,800 dead on the plain, according to the British count, and thousands more wounded. Although Kitchener later attracted criticism for his failure to care properly for his own wounded, the plight of the



A photograph taken of the battlefield of Omdurman immediately afterwards showing the Mahdist dead strewn across the featureless killing ground. It is not clear if the sitting figure is wounded or has died trying to struggle up. (Author's collection)

ansar was much worse; many of the wounded were shot or bayoneted as the victors passed over the field, while the rest were left to fend for themselves. Days later, the passage up the Nile was marked by the masses of *ansar*, some still alive, who had crawled to the riverbank in a desperate search for water. The number of *ansar* wounded was probably two or three times the number of killed, and few received any help from their fleeing comrades.

Kitchener's gunboats shelled the *ansar* as they retreated and by late afternoon the British were in Omdurman. The Mahdi's tomb, already damaged by earlier shelling, was blown up in an act of revenge for Gordon's death, and the Mahdi's remains cast into the Nile; Kitchener intended to keep the skull as a medical curiosity, but when news of this reached Queen Victoria she was apparently appalled and in the end Kitchener had it buried. Two days after the battle a memorial service was held at the ruins of the Governor's palace in Khartoum where Gordon had died.

The victory in the Kereri hills had shattered the Mahdiyya. The bulk of the British troops were withdrawn, and a new Anglo-Egyptian administration was set up at Omdurman – the short-lived Sudanese independence had once more been suppressed by outsiders. Having efficiently despatched that part of his orders, Kitchener then sailed up the Nile to confront the small French force that had established itself on the southern borders at Fashoda. For a few days the representatives of two of the most powerful European empires faced each other down in the middle of Africa; eventually, after hurried discussions between London and Paris, the French gave way. British influence down the length of the Nile, from Cairo to Fashoda, was secure.

The Khalifa himself had escaped from Omdurman with the survivors of the battle, and for several months British-led Egyptian patrols harried him, and other *ansar* bands, determined to break up the last support for Mahdism. In the Kordofan deserts, where he was from, the Khalifa showed signs of being able to rebuild his support, and it was more than a year before the British were able to neutralize him. On 25 November 1899 a column of Egyptian troops discovered the Khalifa's last great concentration at Um Dibaykarat, and attacked; the *ansar* went forward with their usual determination, but were cut down by artillery and Maxim machine-gun fire before they got close. After the battle, among the bodies a group of men were found who had calmly placed prayer rugs on the ground and sat down to await their fate; it was the Khalifa and his last remaining disciples.



The end of Mahdism: the Khalifa Abdullahi al-Taishi (centre right) and his *shaikhs* lie dead on the battlefield of Um Dibaykarat, 25 November 1899. (Author's collection)

ORDERS OF BATTLE

Abu Klea, 17 January 1885

British forces (Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stewart)

1st Division, Naval Brigade (Captain Lord Charles Beresford RN; one Gardner gun; 45 all ranks)

Four companies, Guards Camel Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Hon. E.E.T. Boscawen; 384 all ranks)

Three and one-half companies, Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment (Major C.T. Barrow; 334 all ranks)

Five companies, Heavy Camel Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Hon. R.A.J. Talbot; 400 all ranks)

C and G companies, 1st Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment (Major M.S.J. Sunderland; 130 all ranks)

1st Battery/1st Brigade, Southern Division, Royal Artillery (Captain G.F.A. Norton): half-battery with three 7-pdr screw guns (25 all ranks)

150 baggage camels with 50 drivers

Medical detachment

NB: Two troops of the 19th Hussars (Lieutenant-Colonel P.H.S. Barrow; 126 all ranks) were skirmishing outside

the square but at too great a distance to take part in the battle. A covering force (Major A.S.H. Gern) composed of B and F companies of 1st Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment, plus two sections of B Company, Mounted Infantry Camel Regiment, and the 26th Field Company RE, with commissariat and transport details, was left to guard the *zariba* at the site of the previous night's bivouac, and took no part in the battle.

Mahdist forces (Amir Musa wad Hilu)

Berber contingent (Amir Abd-al-Majid Nasr al-Din abu'l-Kailak): 250 mounted and 1,750 swordmen and spearmen from various tribes including the Abedeh and Bisharin, plus 60 captured Egyptian riflemen (Muhammad Effendi Wahabi)

Metemmeh contingent (Amir Ali-wad-Saad): 2,000 swordmen and spearmen, mostly Ja'liyin ad Awadiyeh

Omdurman contingent (Amirs Musa wad Hilu and Hamdan abu Anja): 4,000–6,000 Kordofani tribesmen, 600 spearmen from other tribes and 400 riflemen

Tofrek, 22 March 1885

Anglo-Indian forces

2nd Brigade (Major-General Sir John McNeill): 1st Battalion, The Princess Charlotte of Wales's (Berkshire Regiment) (Lieutenant-Colonel A.G. Huyshe; 625 all ranks); Royal Marine Light Infantry (Lieutenant-Colonel N.F. Way; 625 all ranks); 17th Field Company RE, plus part of 24th Field Company RE (Colonel E.P. Leads); Naval Brigade (Commander W.C.H. Domville RN; four Gardner guns; 33 all ranks); ammunition column

Indian Brigade (Brigadier-General J. Hudson): 15th (The Loodianah) Bengal Native Infantry (Colonel G.R. Hennessey; 805 all ranks); 17th (The Loyal Poorbeah) Bengal Native Infantry (Major J.M.W. Von Beverhoudt; 822 all ranks); 28th Bombay Native Infantry (Lieutenant-Colonel F.C. Singleton; 830 all ranks); F Company, Queen's Own Madras Sappers and Miners (Captain C.B. Wilkieson RE; 187 all ranks)

Column troops: 2nd Telegraph Section RE

Transport (Captain W. Pollock): 1,200 camels plus 300 mules with 400–500 drivers; 10–12 Royal Engineers; two-horse carts

Cavalry present at outset: one squadron, 5th Royal Irish Lancers (Captain L.H. Jones; 110 all ranks)

Cavalry, late arrivals: one squadron, 20th Hussars (Major F.J. Graves; 110 all ranks); one squadron, 9th Bengal Cavalry (Lieutenant L.S. Peyton; 150 all ranks); one troop, 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers (Lieutenant W.H. Goodair; 40 all ranks)

Mahdist forces ('Uthman Digna)

5,000 Bija (Hadandawa, Beni Amer and Amarar)

Athara, 8 April 1898

Anglo-Egyptian forces (Sirdar Herbert Kitchener)

British Brigade (Lieutenant-General Sir William Gatacre)

1st Battalion, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders;
1st Battalion, The Seaforth Highlanders (Ross-shire Buffs,
The Duke of Albany's); 1st Battalion, The Lincolnshire
Regiment; 1st Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire
Regiment

Egyptian Division (Major-General Sir Archibald Hunter)

1st Brigade (Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel H. Macdonald):
2nd Egyptians; 9th, 10th and 11th Soudanese
2nd Brigade (Lieutenant-Colonel J. Maxwell):
8th Egyptians; 12th, 13th and 14th Soudanese
3rd Brigade (Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel D.F. Lewis):
3rd, 4th, 7th and 15th Egyptians (detachment)
Six Maxim guns

Egyptian cavalry (Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Broadwood)

Eight squadrons with six mule-drawn Maxims attached
Horse battery (Major Young): six Krupp guns

Artillery division (Lieutenant-Colonel C. Long)

Three batteries of six 14-pdr Maxim-Nordenfelt quick-firing
guns, with Egyptian crews
One 14-pdr rocket tube (Lieutenant Beatty RN), with
Egyptian gunners
Baggage and transport personnel
Total Anglo-Egyptian forces approx. 12,000 men

Mahdist forces (Amir Mahmud wad Ahmad)

Over 15,000 men, including 2,000 Baqqara horsemen
Ten guns, some of them captured Egyptian Krupp guns, the
remainder brass cannon

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raffaele.ruggeri@alice.it

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Army Group	Army	Corps	Division	Brigade	Regiment	Battalion
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Airborne	Unit HQ	Air defence	Air Force	Air mobile	Air transportable	Amphibious
Anti-tank	Armour	Air aviation	Bridging	Engineer	Headquarters	Maintenance
Medical	Missile	Mountain	Navy	Nuclear, biological, chemical	Ordnance	Parachute
Reconnaissance	Signal	Supply	Transport movement	Fortress or static	Fortress machine gun	

Key to unit identification

